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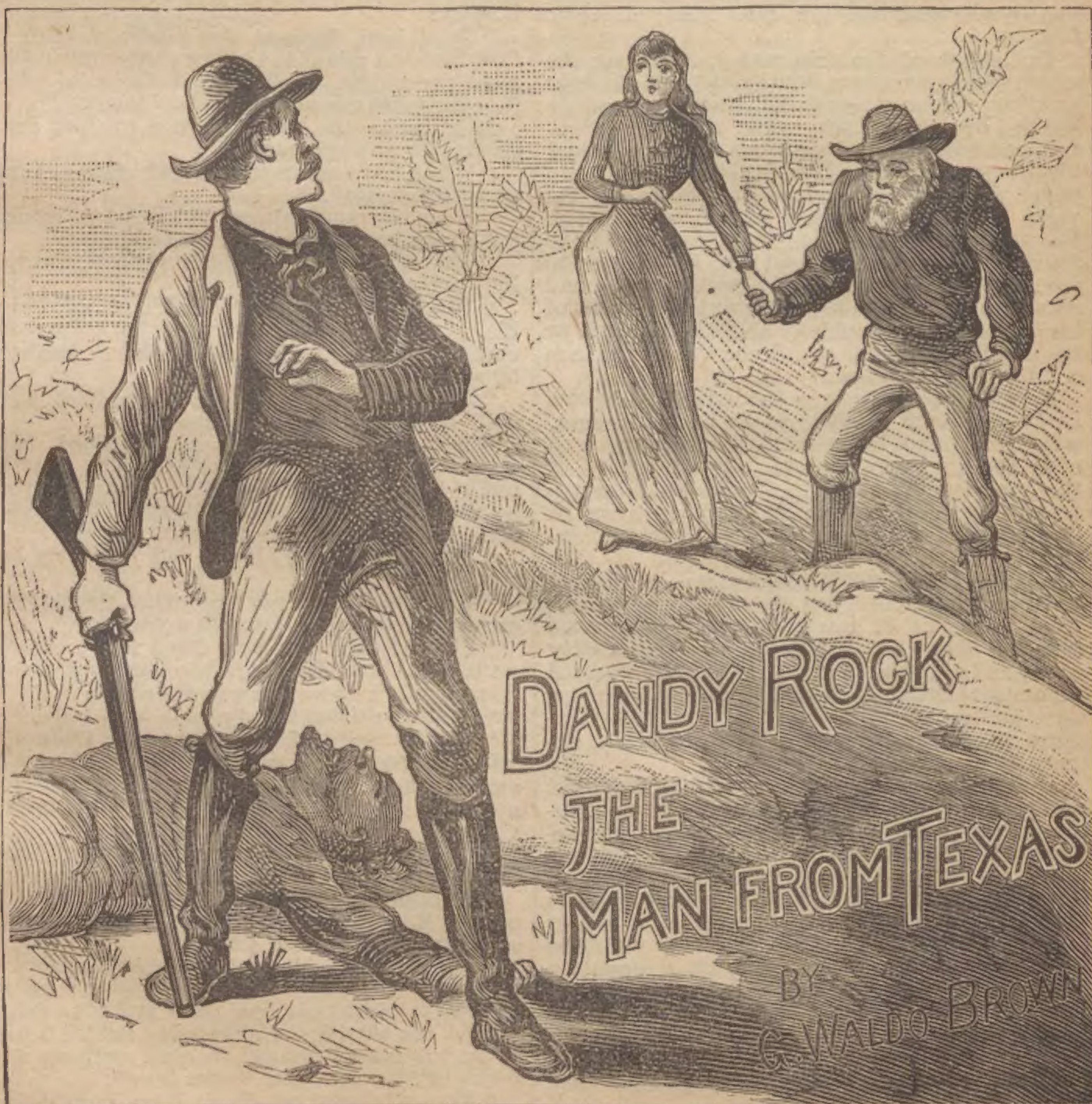
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CHAUNCY CLIFFORD STARTED BACK WITH AN INVOLUNTARY CRY AS HE SUDDENLY BEHELD THE FAIR GIRL.

Dandy Rock,

THE MAN FROM TEXAS.

A Wild Romance of the Land of Gold.

BY G. WALDO BROWNE.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS SHOT.

TIME:—The sunset hour of an August day, 1853.

Location:—A wild, rugged, picturesque valley, known in local history as "Gold Dust Hollow," resting under the shadow of the beetling crags and cliffs of the grim, hoary Sierras, in the county of Calaveras and "Land of Gold."

Personæ:—Three horsemen, weary and dust-laden with miles of riding, halted on the summit overlooking the low land lying at their feet.

The eldest of the trio was just passing the zenith of life, as shown by the silver of his hair and long, unkempt beard. Exposure to mountain life had bronzed his skin, while years of adventure and hardship had made his form gaunt and his face stern; still he bore his six feet and two inches of manhood erect as in youth, and the vigor of his earlier years seemed unimpaired. His real name, Jared Jones, he would not have answered to at first, so used had he become to the *sobriquet* of Silver Ray, a nickname he had gained in '49. From the awkward movement of his person to the twinkle of his light-blue eye, or the nasal drawl in his speech, he was every inch a "Down-east Yankee."

Next in the party was the individual known as Dandy Rock Randel, an ex-Texan Ranger, who had found his way to this country soon after the discovery of gold. On the plains of the Lone Star State he had won an enviable notoriety for his bravery; in the mountains of California he had fully maintained that reputation.

As indicated by his pseudonym, he aspired to be somewhat of a "gentleman," and was attired in a suit of gaudy pattern. His raven hair fell about his shoulders in a waving, jetty mass, and a mustache of the same hue reached an unusual length. Though his complexion was dark and sunburnt, his regular, clearly-cut features made him, despite all eccentricities, extremely handsome.

Last in years of the little cavalcade, but first in every quality which constitutes true manhood, was Chauncy Clifford, who had quite recently left his Eastern home to seek his fortune amid the "diggings" of Calaveras. Erect in form, of medium height, with handsome features and fair complexion, he was a model of manly beauty. His dark-brown hair was worn after the Eastern style, rather than at "mountain length." A mustache of the same hue graced his face, and added a pleasing firmness to his genial countenance.

All were armed after the Western manner, and mounted on small but hardy ponies, while leading pack-animals.

Chauncy and Silver Ray had come up from

Dry Town, a few miles below, and under the guidance of Dandy Rock, were seeking Gold-dust "City," which was even then in full sight, though some ten miles down the valley.

"Upon my honor," exclaimed Chauncy, "this is a grand scene! And that collection of hamlets we see yonder is Gold-dust City?"

"Right, pard," answered Rock, promptly; "but we must jog along ef we would reach there afore dark."

"I say, Rock, suppose we bivouac not far from here, and in the morning prospect the valley, before we go down to the city? What say you, Ray—is not the promise good for a claim just below here?"

"You are right, my boy," responded the third; "ef we don't strike a lead that'll pan out rich, I'll own that I am meaner than a Digger squaw!"

Suddenly a most grotesque contortion marked the face of Rock Randel, as he exclaimed, huskily:

"Good lord, boyees! don't talk o' that! I 'low there's a pile o' the yaller stuff lyin' around loose hereabouts, but it won't do for us to touch it. We must not stop this side o' the city!"

In surprise the others turned to their companion for an explanation.

"What, have others staked their claims hyar?" asked Silver Ray.

"N-no, not that!" almost whispered the miner. "No man has a claim this side Gold-dust."

"Then who will dispute our right to the valley?" queried Chauncy.

"Who?" echoed Rock, while he trembled visible. "Boyees," and he lowered his voice to an ominous whisper, "*this yer valley is haunted by spirit miners!*"

"Haunted? What do you mean, Rock Randel?" demanded the young man.

"Mean? I tell you, Chauncy Clifford, thar ar' spooks in that holler an' they jess run the hull thing to suit themselves! Why bless you, no mortal man dares to go there in the night-time, much more to work a claim there!"

"You surprise me, Rock; but how long has this been?"

"Ever since the great fight when the rightful owners were rubbed out nigh a year ago."

"I have heard o' it way down in Stockton," exclaimed Silver Ray, now thoroughly aroused, "but I didn't know this war the place."

"It am!" replied Dandy Rock, decidedly.

"Hark!" suddenly commanded Chauncy. "If I mistake not, I heard the sound of a pick-ax even now. Ha! Rock, your story goes for naught, as some one is surely at work in the valley."

"'Tis only the blind miner," answered Randel, quickly; "he is 'most always at his work."

"A blind miner and at work in a haunted mine! Rock, you are chaffing. Come, own up, and say you have been joking."

"I am in dead 'arnest!" was the impressive reply. "This hull gorge is mined by a lot of spooks, an' no livin' man dare stake a claim, 'ceptin' the old blind Californian, an' I'll bet he w'u'd git up an' git ef he c'u'd only see the pesky critters cavortin' 'round him!"

"You so interest me, Rock, I am more determined than ever to explore the place."

"Good Lor', Chauncy! *don't!* It will be the death o' all us!"

"You need not follow, Rock, unless you choose."

"No good'll kem o' it, mark what I say, but ef you ar' bound to go, why Rock Randel am jess the 'coon to keep you company."

Quickly tethering their horses, for it would be impossible for them to be of service in their descent, the trio, with their rifles in hand, were soon cautiously working their way down the rugged hill toward the sound which alone broke the solitude of the valley.

Very soon they had reached a position which enabled them to get a somewhat extended view of the prospect below.

Chauncy had just reached one of the thick clumps of stunted cedars which clinging to the thin covering of earth that partially hid the rocky surface, formed a straggling sort of growth, when he paused, with a warning gesture of the hand to the others.

Almost at their feet yawned a ravine of considerable width.

In the center of the defile, which had evidently been some day the bed of a mountain stream, busily engaged at his task of unearthing the precious ore, they discovered the object of their search—discovered to their surprise, not only one but two persons—a man and a woman!

"Jess es I hev heerd," muttered Rock; "the old man and his darter!"

It was a strange tableau. An old man, feeble with age, his long, snow white hair and flowing beard of the same color, falling at great length, wielding a heavy mining pick with a slow, uncertain power.

Near by, and watching him closely, while ever and anon guiding his movement, a girl, with face and form of rare loveliness, presented a pleasing and singular contrast to the other's uncouth appearance. Her symmetrical figure moved with a dignity becoming a queen. Even in the distance it could be seen that her skin was superbly fair, while her features were of that regular and handsome type that marked her for one of gentle blood. Her dark eyes seemed to flash and glow, while the wealth of auburn hair falling even below her slender waist, fairly glistened in the sunlight.

"Upon my honor," murmured young Clifford, at last breaking the silence, "isn't she handsome? The most beautiful woman I ever saw!"

"Wal, she am purty as a picter," admitted Dandy Rock; "but Chauncy, don't ye git smitten with her good looks, for they are all she has got to boast of."

"Who is she, and how comes she here in the company of that old miner?" asked the young man.

"The old gent is her father; but I can tell you something stranger than all you have asked. *That old miner is blind—stone blind; and she is deaf and dumb!*"

"Deaf and dumb!" repeated Clifford; "and so handsome!"

"Wal, I reckon her being so purty don't make nary difference."

"But can you tell me the mystery of all this?"

"Wal, I hain't no hand at yarning it, but while you are watching them, I will tell you the story jess es I have heard it."

"Two Californian brothers, named Calvo, once owned all this region, and when gold was discovered they hired miners, and were soon panning out the dust at a big rate."

"Purty soon up comes a lot of Frisco roughs, and finding the Calvoes had struck a rich lead, they jess rubbed out the hull party 'cept the old man there and his darter, and took the mine."

"The moment the Frisco fellers staked their claim, which had cost them at least twenty lives, everything seemed to go ag'in' 'em. All at once, every night they would hear the awfullest sounds, as if a great battle was going on. Horsemen would be heard and the report of guns, mingling with cries an' groans of fearful distress. Then suddenly, one by one, the miners would fall down dead. There was no report of a rifle, and no one was ever found who could have shot them; but every man who was killed had a silver bullet in his brain."

"At last the villains fled from the mine in terror, and no one has dared to work it since."

"Cast Calvo, the old miner there, was blinded by a shot, and he and his deaf and dumb darter hev undisputed possession of the whole valley. They work there, day after day, and carry their dust or ore down to the city, and get their provision. You can see the hut where they live jess up the side o' the hill. A leetle beyond is the ruins of the old Calvo encampment."

All was plainly seen as Rock indicated.

"You say there is plenty of gold," half-questioned, half-answered Chauncy.

"Wal, I sed there am a rich lead, an' I reckon Rock Randel don't lie jess to hear hisself speak. There am what they call the Golden Cave jess 'bove where old Calvo has set his pan, which is chuck full o' the yaller p'izen, but it don't do any one any good. Every night ef you dare go near enough you can hear jess as natural as life men at work with their picks and pans, but they are spirit miners!"

"Oh humbug, Rock! there can be no such thing."

"'Tis so!" reaffirmed the superstitious miner. "The ghosts of the Calvo boys haunt this valley, and it's death to him who dares to meet them!"

"Be it as it will, Rock, I am going down to see that blind miner and his lovely daughter; and if the prospect for gold is as good as you say, I am going to claim my share."

"Don't!" pleaded Dandy Rock, in evident terror. "Ef you do, the first you will know you will be dead, with a silver bullet in your brain!"

Chauncy Clifford laughed, and was about to move, when Silver Ray caught him by the arm, and pointed down the ravine.

Surprised, Chauncy turned to discover the form of a man crouching under the edge of the thick undergrowth which lined the bottom. Like them, he seemed to be watching the blind miner and his companion.

Scarcely had the three men above noticed this stranger, when he abruptly raised a rifle to his shoulder, and pointing it directly at the unsuspecting couple, hastily glanced along its barrel. But the man, as if thinking better of his intentions, suddenly lowered the ominous muzzle.

Breathless the trio awaited the issue.

An instant later, the cowering dastard leveled his gun for the second time, and there was no sign of hesitation then; but Chauncey Clifford, with nervous haste, brought his own rifle to shoulder, and almost instantly fired.

As the sharp spang of his firearm rung on the air, the man with a piercing cry, reeled and fell to the earth.

Quickly dashing down the hillside, Chauncey soon reached the spot, when he found the body lifeless. A tiny mark of crimson upon the temple told of the shot which had so suddenly cut the thread of life.

"Mercy!" he groaned, staggering backward, *I could not have shot him, for I wished to spare his life, and aimed to avoid his head or breast.*

Suddenly a body of men sprung from ambush, and a hoarse voice cried:

"'Twas your shot which killed him, as no other was fired; an', by the Spirit of Gold-dust Hollow, you shall swing for it!"

CHAPTER II.

SILVER BULLETS.

ERE Chauncey Clifford could comprehend his sudden danger, a dozen or more of armed men, springing from their concealment, rushed upon him, and he was borne to the earth, to be quickly overpowered.

"What means this?" he at last found breath to say:

"That you are our prisoner!" growled a hoarse-voiced miner, of gigantic form, who seemed to be the leader of the party. "Quick, boys, a bit of lariat, an' we'll show the chap what we mean. I reckon we will l'arn him better than to be shootin' down in cold blood peaceful miners!"

In a trice the captive was bound, and eager hands were ready to place the fatal noose upon his neck. But mountain justice was delayed; the execution was stayed; and the startling scene developed into one of still deeper interest.

Silver Ray and Dandy Rock had dashed down the hillside to the rescue of their companion, and at this moment reached the ravine.

The tall miner was ahead, closely followed by the Texan, and both held their double-barreled rifles nervously in hand.

"Hold!" thundered the stentorian voice of Silver Ray, as he covered the foremost of the gang with his weapon. "The fu'st who dares to touch my pard dies like a coyote!"

So sudden and unexpected, as well as recklessly defiant, was the demand of our miner, that the others shrunk back in confused alarm.

"Furies!" gasped the leader; "jess p'int thet shooter o' yourn t'other way, ye long Tom, fer I feel mighty skeery, ye are so confounded keerness! I reckon no one'll spile yer homely mug fer yer!"

"Be careful how you pan out, Stockton Sharp," gritted Silver Ray.

"My teeth! is thet ye, Silver Ray?" cried the

one addressed as Stockton Sharp. "An' as true es I am a livin' sinner," he exclaimed with his next breath, as he caught sight of Dandy Rock, "there is The-Man-from-Texas!"

"Wal, he am!" chimed in that respected worthy; "and I reckon he means bizness, too!"

A moment's suspense, and then Stockton Sharp, partly recovering his wonted composure, exclaimed:

"Must I ax you to put down thet shooter ag'in, Silver Ray? We hain't a-goin' to hurt ye!"

"Free my friend, Stockton Sharp, and then I will chip in."

"Look a-here, Silver Ray, that ar' chap hes rung a cold deal on one of our pards, an' he hes got to swing fer it! But we ar' 'onorable men, and we ar' willin' to give him a fair shake; so take 'way thet old iron o' yourn and we'll tote him down to the city."

"Stockton Sharp," said the old miner, in a slow, measured tone, "ef my pard here kilt that man he done it to risky a better life, and by all the ore in Silver Mountain, he don't go down to Gold-dust in fetters!"

The bold words were received with a shout of derision, but ere a reply was given in words, footsteps were heard approaching, and almost instantly a new-comer appeared.

"The cap'en!" was the glad greeting of the roughs, and Stockton Sharp breathed easier.

The arrival was a heavily-bearded, strong-limbed man, of perhaps thirty years of age, who had a wide-spread notoriety as the leading spirit of the Calaveras miners; a crack shot and an expert wrestler, whose name was ever coupled with some deed of prowess.

Buck Warner, or Gold-dust Buck as he was more generally called, seemed to realize in an instant the state of affairs; and, as he listened to the few words of explanation from Stockton Sharp, his eagle eyes flashed furiously, while the fierce clinching of his teeth told that the prisoner could expect no mercy from him.

"There is no need to fool about a trial," he cried. "The evidence is plain that the dastard murdered Ralph, so up with him. I am impatient to get out of this infernal place!"

In answer the band sprung forward to execute the bloody work, when, suddenly, a terrified cry from Stockton Sharp caused them to stop.

Silver Ray had hastily cocked his rifle and in another breath he would have fired. As the horde paused, he cried.

"Stand back, or Stockton Sharp dies!"

"The same to you, Buck Warner, ef you dare to raise a finger 'gainst Chauncey Clifford," supplemented Dandy Rock, as he leveled his own rifle at the chief.

It was a wild, awe-inspiring scene—two men holding at bay six times their number.

Thus far Chauncey had failed to speak. In fact, so rapidly had the startling scene revolved on its course that he had had barely time to recover from his bewilderment.

"Friends," he cried, addressing the excited crowd, "if I killed your friend I did it accidentally, and while trying to save another life. From here I can see that the wound is on the forehead. He was standing with his side toward me and thus it could not have been my

bullet which killed him. Will some of you please examine the shot and also the rifle?"

Until now no one had thought of aught save to avenge the death of the slain; but at a word from Warner a couple commenced a hurried investigation.

The hammer of the rifle was found to be broken off, but to meet this it was declared that the bullet had glanced. No other shot had been fired, it was certain, and the proof seemed conclusive that such had been the case.

"By the Golden Gate o' Frisco!" suddenly exclaimed one of the men by the body, "look, Gold-dust Buck! *It was done with a silver bullet!*"

The announcement of the singular discovery seemed to terrify the sharp and his followers, while the faces of Chauncy's friends brightened as they felt it would now be an easy thing to prove his innocence.

"It is just as I told you, Gold Buck," said Clifford; "some one else fired the fatal shot, and the report of his rifle blended so nearly with mine that they sounded as one."

"Bah!" shrieked Warner, "you needn't think you have cleared your neck! If you are the chap who slings these silver slugs so plentifully, we are all the more anxious to pass you to perdition. Boys—"

"Hold! If you think I fired that silver bullet—"

"Up with the dog!" roared the infuriated Gold-dust Buck, forgetting in his excitement his own peril. "At last we have found the accursed rifleman who uses silver bullets!"

With fierce yells of vengeance the desperate gang stood cowering like a pack of hungry wolves, ready to leap upon their prey.

"Not till you pass over my dead body!" hurled back Silver Ray, defiantly.

The sharp click of Dandy Rock's rifle spoke as ominously.

Gold-dust Buck moved his lips to speak, but the words died to a groan, as a ball sped past his temple, so near that it stirred his hair, and striking the limb of a tree just to his rear, fell to the earth at his feet. There had been no report, and as he instinctively glanced down, he shuddered as he saw that the bullet was of shining silver!

"The Silent Rifleman!" half a dozen voices chorused in terror. Then every tongue was hushed by the abrupt appearance of the blind miner, led by the beautiful mute.

Pausing near the prostrate prisoner, the strange twain became a silent and motionless part of the exciting scene.

The sightless orbs of the old man seemed to finally become fixed upon Buck Warner, when at last he said:

"Men of Gold-dust City, you are on forbidden ground; and unless you free the innocent man whom you would slay, and leave this valley at once, your bones shall bleach in Death Canyon, as do those of the Calvo boys!"

As the blind miner ceased speaking, the beautiful mute, seizing a knife from his belt, quickly severed the thongs which bound Chauncy, and motioned for him to rise.

"May Heaven bless you!" cried Chauncy, in delight, as he sprung to his feet; then, seeing a

sudden shade upon her fair countenance, and remembering her affliction, he silently took her extended hand, when, as he held it, she dextrously slipped a bit of paper into his palm, to free herself from his hold the next instant and turn to face the mad throng.

Chauncy retained the scrap of paper as a precious treasure; but his attention was momentarily arrested in other directions.

"Go!" the old miner was saying, still facing Gold Buck, "go as I have warned you, and let the stranger depart his way in peace. He had nothing to do with the death of your friend."

Still the miners from Gold-dust, as if spell-bound, hesitated to move.

At last Gold-dust Buck said:

"Very well, old man, we will go; but I warn you that we shall come again, to pan the gold which I know lies hidden in this valley."

Suddenly the blind miner foamed with rage and excitement, as he cried in wild frenzy:

"Beware! beware how you defy the spirit owners of Calvo Valley! Silver bullets shall fall like hail-stones, and Death Canyon shall overflow with blood before any follower of Gold-dust Buck shall possess one grain of the Calvo gold!"

The speaker's words rose to a spiteful energy as he concluded, and he had barely given the last its utterance, when a loud and continued whizzing, whirring sound cleft the air, and a perfect cloud of bullets dashed spitefully by, in almost every direction, many dangerously near.

Buck Warner's followers dared no more, but actually fled in wildest alarm; and even the intrepid leader himself, with a defiant wave of his hand, soon disappeared.

The three friends would have tarried, but the wild pantomime of the girl mute warned them to leave, and a few minutes later they were hurrying back to find their animals.

As soon as the singular couple were left behind, Chauncy showed the paper given him by the beautiful girl-miner.

With considerable difficulty he deciphered the faint pencilings, traced in an irregular hand; and while he read their look of wonder turned to astonishment.

"If you value your lives, leave Gold-dust Hollow at once.
A FRIEND."

Only that.

"By Randel Rock!" exclaimed The-Man-from-Texas, "that am the best 'vice I hev heern lately."

"But I should like to unravel the mystery of this valley," said Chauncy.

"Better look out for our own selves fu'st," avowed Silver Ray.

A little later the trio reached the spot where they had left their horses, when to their dismay they discovered that the animals were gone!

CHAPTER III.

A "BLIND TRAIL."

"THIS am a party go!" muttered Dandy Rock. "The next we know we shall lose our skulps!"

"Some one has stolen them," declared Chauncy, seeing that the animals were surely gone.

"Yes; and by hookey! hyar am the hoof-

print o' the varmint that done it!" suddenly affirmed The-Man-from-Texas as he pointed to footsteps left in the earth a little beyond them.

Following in the direction a few rods they discovered other tracks similar to the first, and, more important still, the hoof-marks of their horses made but a few minutes before.

"Some sneakin' coyote o' a hoss-thief has toted them off!" avowed Rock.

"Wal, I reckon; and there'll be a job for us to git them back," broke in Silver Ray.

"You are right," added Chauncy. "Think you, Rock, you are trailer enough to follow the course these robbers have taken?"

"Jumping buffler! who am I?" asked The-Man-from-Texas proudly; "Rock Randel don't give up the trail to nary 'coon in the mountains and he'll jess hunt down the varmint who stole our team or git throwed cold meat to buzzards!"

"Don't you think there is but one?" asked Chauncy, in surprise.

"Nary a more," replied the plainsman, quickly. "Howsumever, thar may be others ambushin' to cover his 'treat."

The sun had already set, and the long shadows of twilight were fast deepening into the shade of night; but without hesitation they followed the course indicated by the trail, which led toward the darkest and wildest recesses of the valley.

At times, even the shrewd and practiced eye of Dandy Rock, who had spent so many years as a tracker, was severely taxed, in order to continue their progress with any promise of success.

Perhaps half a mile had been passed at a snail's pace, when suddenly Rock paused, and said, in a low, hoarse whisper:

"Boyees, we are follerin' a blind trail."

"A blind trail!" repeated Chauncy, in wonder. "What do you mean, Rock?"

"Why, jess this, Chaunce; there am sumthin' 'bout this which ain't right, and the sooner we git out o' it the better."

"And lose our skulps," replied The-Man-from-Texas, tersely.

"But—"

"I tell ye, Chaunce Clifford, we ar' goin' whar no mortal man can go and live! Jess ahead am Death Canyon; and I sha'n't be s'prised to see a speerit tote me off every minnit!"

"Tut, Rock! You are superstitious, and more scared than hurt. Come, lead on, and I'll warrant there will be no ghost to spirit us away!"

With a horrid grimace the trembling tracker started on, muttering his fears under his bated breath.

The trio had then nearly reached the bottom of the valley, and it was getting so dark that to follow the trail much longer would be impossible.

Chauncy was fast growing nervous, knowing that some preparations must be made for a night's bivouac in the Hollow, for he had no intention of turning back, when Dandy Rock, who was in advance down upon his hands and knees looking for the lost traces of the trail, sprung to his feet, and frantically beckoned the others forward.

"'Tis as I hev said," he cried. "The trail

don't go enny further! It ends short off here, and our hosses hev been speerited away!"

Chauncy could scarcely suppress a laugh at his companion's most ridiculous fright. But appearing as stoical as possible, the young miner joined in the search for the missing hoof-prints.

The trail was plainly seen until reaching a small table-rock or ledge some score of feet in diameter, but further no trace of it could be found.

Upon every side and beyond, within a considerable radius the friends continued to look for the lost trail but they spent their time in a vain search.

Rock Randel and Silver Ray gazed upon each other in awed silence as they recalled to mind the wild, fanciful stories they had heard repeated of this strangely-peopled valley. Ay, Chauncy Clifford, without the superstitiousness of his companions, was lost in wonder and speculation.

Suddenly they were startled by a wild, piercing cry, which rung on the night-air fearfully like a human voice in direst distress.

Then—

"Help!—hel-p!—h-e-l-p!"

Plainly the appeal was borne to their ears, and rendered doubly vivid by the mocking accent which the forest-grown hillside echoed quickly back.

In speechless expectation the three waited for its repetition. Not long, for again it awoke the stillness of the valley.

"My Heaven!" cried Chauncy, "some one is in peril! Come, boys, we must lend a helping-hand," and without a moment's hesitation or thought, the gallant young miner dashed down the ravine.

Silver Ray followed close behind, barely escaping the clutch of Rock, who had suddenly tried to intercept his companions.

"Don't go there!" fairly shrieked The-Man-from-Texas, his face ghastly white and terror-stricken. "Tis only the speerits of Death Canyon, and they will make the last o' ye!"

Unheeding the terrified Randel's cries, the others still rushed down the gully toward the sounds heard ever and anon.

"Oh, Lord! we shall all be turned into spooks!" groaned the superstitious Texan, as he saw his companions fast disappearing. "Wal, by Randel Rock!" he continued, in his next breath, while his countenance suddenly gleamed with the light of a desperate resolution. "I might as well turn up my toes thar as hyar!" and evidently too much frightened to remain alone, he fled from the spot, soon gaining his friends.

As they advanced, the appeal for help changed to pitiful cries of anguish, and though rapidly sounding fainter and fainter, they yet seemed nearer, telling that the being in distress was fast failing.

Nerved to a high pitch by the excitement and impetuosity of their situation, the miners, hardly heeding their course, abruptly found themselves entering a narrow defile or canyon, whose opening was not more than twenty feet in width, with sides rearing upward to fully as great a distance.

Had Chauncy Clifford paused for a moment's

thought, he might have hesitated before he would have penetrated the darksome way; but without a single instant's meditation he rushed headlong forward for perhaps a couple of rods, momentarily succeeded by his comrades.

A sudden cry to their rear caused them to abruptly stop. Ha! they had passed the object of their search, and quickly turning to retrace their steps, nothing loth to get out of that fearful place, their ears were instantly deafened and their very senses paralyzed by a quick, thundering noise and concussion, that burst on the stillness like the crash of an earthquake, and which, reverberating up and down the valley, fairly made the earth tremble.

When at last they recovered sufficiently to realize the work, they found, to their dismay, that the canyon where they had entered was completely filled by a huge section of the overhanging cliff, which, by some powerful agency, had been hurled down evidently to crush them out of existence, and had only missed them by a mere hair's breadth.

Then, as once more came back to them the current of thought overmastering their temporary awe, they realized in speechless fear the peril they had so rashly courted, and the dread uncertainty still surrounding them.

Twenty feet of perpendicular granite wall on either side, an unsurmountable barrier behind, and blinding darkness beyond, teeming with deadly perils!

Lost!

CHAPTER IV.

"THE UNLUCKY MINER."

As we have seen, Warner's flight was nearly as precipitate as that of his men; but he finally overtook them some distance down the valley where they had waited for him.

"Are any of you hurt?" he asked.

"Nary a one," replied Stockton Sharp. "But, cap'en, what do you say to that?"

"Oh, nothing," answered Gold Buck, carelessly. "So long as we are unharmed we have no reasons to grumble."

"But, hadn't we better git fer the city?"

"What! and leave all this gold to that Man-from-Texas and his pards! Are you a fool, Stockton Sharp?"

"I am mighty afeerd o' 'em silver bullets!"

"Bah! Sam Sharp! you are a coward if you back out now!"

"But, Buck, Ralph is the fifth one of us who hes gone down in thet way, and the Lord only knows who will be next!"

"If that is what you fear, say your prayers and go."

"But the Silent Rifleman don't gi'n a fair show. He runs a blind lead!"

"Look here, Stockton Sharp, we have come here to pan the gold in Calvo Valley, and if you or any other man wishes to go back to Gold-dust you are at liberty to do so. I, for one, am determined to hold my stakes. There is a pile of the yellow treasure and I am going to have my share!"

"Wal," cried Stockton, "ef ye dare to set yer pan hyar, Sam Sharp ken do ther same."

"Now you talk like a man. What say you. Dry-town Jim?" he continued, addressing a broad-shouldered, weather-beaten miner.

"I reckon," replied that individual, "that Jim Reynolds ain't turned coyote!" and he took a position by the side of Warner.

"Waugh!" grunted a stunted specimen of humanity known as Wolverine, "hy'ar's a man es is a man!" and with a chuckle he ranged himself near his leader.

"Frisco Frank don't git up and levant not while he sees gold thet's to be hed fer the pickin' up," avowed a third.

Soon nine of the twelve had signified their determination to join their fortunes with that of Gold-dust Buck.

"Very well," said Warner to the remaining three, "you can go back to the city, and I hope you will not regret what your cowardice hasn't brought ye. Come, boys," turning to the others, "we will camp to-night, just below here, near Silverstone Creek, where I have staked the richest lead this side Dry-up Mine."

Leaving the intimidated miners to return to the settlement, Buck Warner led his followers rapidly down the ravine.

"Boys," said the self-appointed leader, "there is a rich lode in this valley, and if we have the grit to get it, we can go down to Frisco the richest men in Calaveras. But it is a perilous undertaking, and to succeed we must stand as one man. Do you all swear that, come what may, you will hold fast to me in this work, and obey my every command?"

"We do," chorused the crowd as one voice.

"Very well; and the first man who is false to our vow shall die like a Digger dog! Will you swear to that?"

"We will."

"Then, though it costs us blood, our fortunes are made. Come, boys, with me, and I will show you a sight that will dazzle your eyes!"

A few minutes later the miners reached a stream of considerable size, which had been designated as Silverstone.

Glancing into the crystal water, Gold-dust Buck was about to point at a collection of shining yellow particles glistening in its bottom, when chancing to look further down the creek, he started back with a suppressed oath.

A few rods below, seeming wholly unconcerned as to what was passing around him in that rock-bound, primeval wilderness, was a solitary miner, leaning sluggishly upon his heavy pick, as resting from his work a moment to admire a nugget of gold which he held in his open palm.

"Look!" hissed Gold-dust Buck; "'tis Small Profit, the unlucky miner."

"Good mercy!" gasped Stockton Sam; "so 'tis."

"Ye fires!" whispered Frisco Frank; "I know now what hes made everything go to bu'st so in Gold-dust Hollow. 'Tis thet infernal onlocky digger! Things always go wrong where he is! I hev known of four good claims thet hev gone to 'tarnal smash jess by thet cussid chap a-sneakin' round with his onluckiness."

"Yes," affirmed Warner, "and he has no business here; so we will give him his walking-papers. Frisco, you go down with me, and we will giv him a fair chance to levant. If he

shows fight, the rest of you be ready to pitch in. Stay; he's a sharp 'coon, and we have got to spot our claim carefully. Let Mexican Murke slip down under cover of those bushes while I hold his attention in front, and if the dog refuses to accept my terms lasso him, when we will give him a swing from one of these saplings."

The next instant, Gold-dust Buck with his chosen companion stepped boldly across the creek and down on the other bank to confront the lone miner, who, suddenly discovering them, dropped his pick to instantly seize a rifle near at hand, and calmly awaited their approach.

This lone miner was a person of remarkable appearance.

Of not more than twenty-seven or eight years of age he seemed to be twice that, for his dark, chestnut hair, then uncovered, was well sprinkled with gray, and the high forehead was marked with strong lines of care and hardship, or perhaps sorrow and suffering, while his every look and bearing were pervaded with the deepest melancholy. The smoothly-shaven face was handsome in its outline, and its firm expression told of an iron will and determination of purpose. The stern, dark-gray eyes and the tightly compressed lips spoke alike a tale of trouble and endurance. He never smiled, and rarely, if ever spoke unless directly addressed.

Perhaps no one in Calaveras county was better known than this self-same person, recognized under at least half a dozen names, though best as Shadow, or Small Profit, the most unlucky miner who had ever staked a claim in the Land of Gold.

"So, ho, Small Profit, how comes it you are on forbidden ground?" cried Gold-dust Buck.

"What matters that to you, Buck Warner?" was the only answer, in a cold, metallic tone.

"More than you may think, Unlucky Miner. I have laid claim to this whole valley, and have come to warn you off."

The gray eyes flashed a trifle as the lone miner replied, slowly:

"Is there not ore enough for all, Gold-dust Buck?"

"'Tis not that!" answered Warner, fiercely. "You have no right here, and, besides, your accursed presence cannot be tolerated. The golden yield of too many rich lodes has been blasted by your unlucky presence, and my men fear you—so you must levant!"

"I see no reason for you to make the demand, as my claim is as good as yours. Suppose, then, I refuse to go?"

"Are you a madman as well as a fool?" exclaimed Gold Buck, fast losing his composure.

"That matters not to you, Buck Warner," said Shadow, carelessly, and without betraying a single tremor. "I deny your right to dictate my actions."

"Fire and blazes!" shrieked Warner; "this gold shall be mine. I will give you just ten seconds to decide whether you will leave this valley, or remain to be lashed to the topmost branches of one of those trees food for vultures!"

"Spare your breath—"

"Ten seconds! Shall it be life or death?"

CHAPTER V.

THE GANTLET OF FIRE.

"WE are a goner!" gasped Rock, who was the first to speak.

"I fear we have rashly run into the jaws of death," admitted Chauncy. "Can you tell anything of this place, Rock?"

"Good Lord! Chaunce Clifford, this am Death Canyon! No man hes ever been known to enter this place and come out alive since the Calvo boys got rubbed out hyar!" and the strong man shuddered.

It had become so dark in the defile that it was with difficulty the friends could distinguish each other.

"Our only chance is to advance," said Clifford, as they hurriedly examined their surroundings.

Hark! Suddenly a series of wild, discordant cries were borne to their ears. The unearthly sounds came from above apparently, and were so hideous and horrible in their accent that the three felt their blood chill as they listened.

"'Tis the spooks I hev told ye off!" Dandy Rock managed to find breath to whisper.

Their gaze turned upward, as hearing the shrieks, the miners suddenly discovered the form of a man standing on the brink of the bank and evidently peering down upon them.

Hardly expecting any one but foes, they crouched under the wall as much as possible and watched the other's movements.

An instant later the figure was gone, when again the cries were heard, more dreadful than ever.

"This are awful!" groaned Rock; "and we are as good as dead!"

As Rock was speaking he had slightly shifted his position, when his foot struck an object which gave a sharp, rattling sound, and suddenly a glowing, phosphorescent light sprung up from the spot, disclosing in frightful relief the gleaming skull and bones of a human skeleton!

No wonder now The-Man-from-Texas was paralyzed with terror. Even reckless Chauncy Clifford and stout-hearted Silver Ray were mute with horror.

"Boys," Silver Ray at last said, "we mustn't fool hyar. Let's git out o' this infernal place or go under trying it."

The others quickly acquiesced, and slowly and cautiously the hardy three worked their way along the dark, rock-strewn gorge.

Perhaps a hundred rods had been passed and nothing had occurred to alarm them, when Rock who was fast overcoming his superstitious fears advised a pause.

"We must be near the mouth o' the canyon," he said, "and we must be keerful how we show ourselves, or we may get gobbled up wusser nor we got druv in hyar."

Scarcely had the words left the miner's lips, when the quick, sharp whirr of a bullet cleft the air so near his head, that he staggered back as if really shot.

"Are you hurt, Rock?" asked Charley, quickly.

"No; but did ye hear thet? It war a silver bullet, and our game is up!"

"How do you know it was a silver bullet?" queried Silver Ray, in surprise.

"How? 'cause thar was no report. We mus' keep clus' under the side or we are gone up the spout!"

Crouching near the wall of the canyon they advanced a few feet further, when again they stopped, this time at a warning from Silver Ray.

"Look!"

As the old miner gave the exclamation a human figure had suddenly appeared in the glimmering light near the exit of the defile. Only for one instant, however, when it as abruptly vanished.

Not daring to advance further the three stood in breathless waiting. The silence of the now pitchy darkness which shrouded the place was fearfully oppressive.

An instant and again they saw the man before the opening, though he quickly disappeared as before.

He had seemed to make no attempt to conceal his presence, but had boldly come and gone.

Wondering what it meant they were fain to watch and wait, yet in nervous inactivity.

Another moment's suspense, and the spell was broken.

With a wild yell, the person dashed upon the scene the third time, waving above his head a flaming torch!

In the glare of that flash they saw that he had heaped before the mouth of the canyon a huge brush-pile, and was then leaping forward to ignite the combustible mass!

With a shudder, the little party drew together, as they realized their new peril. The wind was drawing through the defile at a smart draft, and once the seasoned wood was fired the smoke would rush down the way in suffocating volumes.

"We are lost!" hissed Silver Ray, "if he fires that brush!" and quickly raising his rifle, he continued:

"His life must save ours!"

As the torch-bearer swung his flaming brand forward to bring its blaze upon the wood, the sharp spang of the old miner's rifle suddenly filled the gorge with its startling report, and the man sprung back as if shot. But with a loud, hoarse shout of derision, he quickly recovered himself, and apparently untouched by the bullet, applied the burning fagot.

For a moment a few tiny sparks seemed suspended from the pile, and ere the air fanned them into a blaze, Dandy Rock, seeing the failure of Silver Ray's shot, hastily brought his own tried weapon to his shoulder, and with careful aim fired, when again the strange being outside gave a malignant cry, but seemed unhurt!

"Good Lord! he's a spook!" gasped the amazed Texan.

At that instant the sparks from the torch lit to a blaze, and then the last flared into a raging flame.

In wild glee the man danced over his hellish work. The wind catching up the stifling smoke soon swept it down the narrow passway in huge, blinding clouds.

Knowing their lives were at stake, Chauncy then attempted what his companions had failed to do.

With deliberate aim, he sent the ball from his

own rifle; but, to the astonishment of himself and the terror of his friends, the mysterious fireman, still untouched, answered the shot with a maniacal laugh.

Then, as for the moment, the startled trio cowered under the cliff, spellbound, without the precursory flash or following report, a rifle-ball sped past Chauncy Clifford's head, so near that he felt the air upon his temple!

By this time the fire had grown to a huge mass of flame, rising high into the night-air. In the weird light, the trembling miners could plainly discern the form of him who so madly exulted over their peril. A tall, cadaverous frame, garbed in coarse and tattered garments that hung loosely about his person, his head unprotected by any covering, unless a tangled mass of snow-white hair reaching far down his back and a beard of the same hue and equal length could be considered such; a pair of eyes, that glowed and gleamed like coals of fire—was what our miners saw at a glance—a single glance, as no time was had for speculation.

Already the dense smoke, which completely filled the place, was suffocating them, and the heat of the fire was growing intense. To retreat would be only to fall sooner or later, overpowered by the stifling air.

"'Tis death to stay here longer!" whispered Chauncy, with great difficulty of speech. "We must run the gantlet of fire, let the end be what it will!"

Each clutched his rifle with a nervous hold, while they all prepared to rush out of the blinding, death-laden darkness through a flame-gantlet to meet—what?"

CHAPTER VI.

AN AWFUL DOOM.

In a slow, ominous tone Buck Warner began to count off the fateful moments; but ere half their number was reached Shadow Hand stopped him with an impatient wave of the arm.

"Then you have decided to leave?" cried Gold-dust Buck, eagerly.

"Never for such as you!" was flung back the defiant reply. "When I leave Silverstone Claim to you, Gold-dust Buck, it will be after my body has been trampled into the dust!"

"Then—"

A sudden noise behind the Unlucky Miner instantly changed the scene to one of tragedy.

Mexican Murke was on the eve of performing his part of Warner's plan when a misstep caused him to blunder. Quick as a flash the miner knew he had foes in his rear, and in a breath his gray eye swept the barrel of his rifle.

With a wild cry of terror, Gold-dust Buck sprung to one side hoping to escape the shot. But no power on earth could have saved him had not the other's weapon missed fire.

Then a sharp *swish*, and, much as the dread boa would ensnare its victim, the lasso of Mexican Murke coiled about the miner, and ere he could escape its fold, the line pinioned his arms to his side, and the unfortunate man was hurled to the earth with a violence that nearly bereft him of his senses.

Half a dozen fell upon the prostrate one, and when they arose, the Unlucky Miner was a securely-bound prisoner,

"Now, fool, you see what you have lost!" cried Gold-dust Buck, as he exulted over the Unlucky Miner's defeat.

The stony eyes of the captive glittered a trifle brighter than common, but he attempted no reply.

"Boss!" whispered Stockton Sharp to Warner, "what ar' ye goin' to do with him? Ye know it will never do to pass him his ticket of leave right out, fer the killin' o' sech an onlucky cuss would bu'st our prospects!"

"Confound your foolish superstitiousness!" hissed Gold-dust Buck; "leave him to me and I'll take the consequences."

To the prisoner the brute went on:

"Alpine Luke, for that is your best name, you haven't forgotten our first meeting up in the upper mines. You did a big thing there, when, single-handed, you whipped a whole mining-camp. You beat me then, but at last I hold the winning hand. I have sworn that you shall die, but I know you are a brave man, and I'll give you one chance for your life."

Seeing the other's provoking indifference to his words, Warner paused, but finally continued:

"You needn't be so uppish about it. Life is as dear to you as any one. So here's the plan:

"If you will discover the mystery of Golden Cave, and turn in with me to mine the ore, I promise you shall go free, and have, too, an equal share with me."

"What if I refuse?" asked the prisoner, calmly.

"Refuse?" shrieked Buck Warner, hoarse with passion. "I will give you three chances and you can suit your own accursed self, for it matters not to me. Either explore Golden Cave for us; leave this valley forever; or, by heavens! I will lash you to the topmost branches of one of these trees, and there you shall hang till relieved by a slow and awful death. Now, Alpine Luke, choose, *quick*."

Just the faintest trace of a smile was visible on the Unlucky Miner's lips, and he spoke with a provoking coolness, as he said slowly:

"Buck Warner, I have no choice to make."

Surprised, the desperado exclaimed:

"Then you choose to die?"

"I repeat, I have no choice to make. Just now I am in your power, but your threats do not frighten me. If you dare not enter Golden Cave yourself, you needn't hope to learn its mystery from me. I consider my claim to the gold in this valley as good as yours, and when I leave it you will have to carry me out!"

For a moment the other was too amazed to speak. Shadow's cool audacity had completely confounded him.

"Just like you, Alpine Luke. Well, it is nothing to me; you have sealed your own death, and now the consequences are your own. You may regret your foolishness when it is too late!" he hissed.

Then the wretch made preparations to carry into effect his most horrible project.

A tall sapling of suitable size soon selected, Gold-dust Buck, aided by his willing followers, succeeded through the means of some hard climbing to secure the lasso to its uppermost part, and then the tree-top was bent over until it nearly reached the earth.

"Now," cried Warner, "we will teach the fool a lesson he will be likely to remember as long as life lasts! Ha! ha-a!"

Unable, of course, to offer any resistance, Alpine Luke was securely lashed to the top of the bending tree. How he longed for one moment's freedom, as the horde did their work!

Gold-dust Buck watched closely the face of his victim, hoping to see there some tokens of fear, but the immobile countenance still shone as impassively as a block of marble. Ay, if Shadow had any of the sensitive feelings of man, he had truly an iron nerve to conceal them so effectually.

The last knot had been secured, and as everything was in readiness to send the fated miner to his awful doom, the perpetrators paused a while to look upon their work, when, on the instant, stricken down, with not a single note of warning, Drytown Jim staggered forward and fell at his companions' feet—dead!

In terror, the others saw a tiny crimson circle on the temple; then, with wild cries of alarm, every man threw himself upon the ground face downward.

The Silver Rifleman had scored another victim with his silver bullet!

Like the action of a bent bow, the sapling, suddenly free, shot up to its natural position with a flash and rush of breathless power; and swinging to and fro among the tree-tops, it bore suspended from its topmost branches, in frightful peril, the struggling form of Alpine Luke, the Unlucky Miner!

CHAPTER VII.

"STIRRING UP THE HORNETS."

"Now, boys," said Chauncy Clifford, "'tis life or death!"

Crouching low for a moment, as gathering their strength for the onset, with half-closed eyes and compressed mouths, they all bounded forward into the stifling smoke and heat, their forms for an instant lost to sight. Then, weak, trembling, and gasping for breath, their clothing all covered with sparks, they cleared the gantlet of fire, and stood outside of Death Canyon and its fearful perils.

So sudden and unexpected had been their movements to the fireman that he sprang back in alarm.

Before, however, the three miners could sufficiently recover to offer any defense to his attack, the excited being, wilder and fiercer than ever, sprang toward them with a clubbed musket raised high over his head, as if to crush them to earth. Aroused by the fierce assault the three made an attempt to escape, when a light form bounded into the path of the assailant, and a pair of outstretched arms as quickly stopped him in his headlong course.

To their surprise, the friends recognized the beautiful mute.

With flashing eyes and violent waves of her hands she confronted the lunatic, who, with a hoarse cry, turned and dashed away through the growth.

With a countenance suffused with the light of her triumph, the heroic girl approached the trio.

Never it seemed to Chauncy Clifford had he

seen so lovely a being. From that moment he was desperately in love—unreasonably so, and with a deaf mute.

Unable to understand her features and sign-language they suffered a painful embarrassment, to break which Chauncy tried to address her in pantomime, but vainly. Finally almost in despair he hunted up a bit of paper and the stump of a pencil, when she wrote in a hurried hand:

"Follow me."

"Don't do it?" warned Dandy Rock, in startled earnestness. "It will be the last of us."

"Nonsense! I see no danger, and I am determined to do it."

"Yas; I'd warrant ye'd foller her right into the Golden Cave, 'cos she has got a purty face."

Seeing their apparent hesitation the fair stranger took the piece of paper from Chauncy's hand, and upon the other side she wrote:

"You have nothing to fear; I will lead you to your horses."

Without further delay, Clifford and Silver Ray decided to accept her guidance, while Rock no longer offered any objections, though he entertained many apprehensions perhaps.

It must be supposed that it was getting quite well along in the evening by this time. The stars were shining in the clear sky, and the moon would soon rise above the battlements of the Sierra Nevada.

Quickly leaving the range of the canyon, the beautiful girl quite swiftly led the way up the valley ravine along the bank of the Silverstone Creek.

In silence our friends followed, though every sense was on the alert for danger.

At last when half a mile had been passed the mute paused, and with a wave of the hand admonished the others to halt.

The miners fancied they heard footsteps within the ravine.

Motioning for them to remain quiet, the girl cautiously advanced a few rods, to a line of shrubbery which skirted the bottom.

The three men saw her part the bushes and gaze into the glade below, then turning to them, she beckoned them forward, though placing one hand on her lips requesting silence.

Reaching the spot, the miners following with their eyes the direction pointed out by her, saw in surprise, some distance down the ravine, their lost horses, now under the control of a dozen or more hideous Indians, who were fast leading them away.

"Ah!" ejaculated Chauncy, "we have new enemies. What say you, boys: shall we attempt to rescue our animals?"

"Wal, I reckon!" responded Rock, "and thar am fun ahead!"

Signifying as best they could their intentions to the mute, she shook her head ominously, but, finding them determined, she finally, with a parting admonition of warning, slowly turned away and left them free to follow their own purposes, while she soon disappeared.

"What a noble, beautiful creature!" murmured Chauncy, aloud. "Oh, that she could speak and understand what we say! But, boys, we must now get back our horses, and once we have succeeded, I wish to learn the mystery of that fair one's life and surroundings."

"Kem on!" cried Rock. "Hyar am the 'coon as will show you how to guzzle the reds. Foller me, and I'll show ye sum fun!"

Dandy Rock, now the acknowledged leader, from his superior woodcraft, silently hurried forward, keeping outside of the small-growth that partially hid the ravine.

Though traversing the broken way at a rapid rate, the footfalls of Rock gave back no sound. To the others, who vainly tried to imitate his example, his noiseless progress was truly wonderful.

"Dog take it!" hissed The-Man-from-Texas, as Chauncy, in spite of his extreme care, occasionally stepped upon some substance which would make a noise, "ef yer don't put down yer elephant huffs with less racket, I won't hev yer company. This am ticklish bizness, ef ye don't want to lose the fun!"

When our party had almost overtaken the savages Rock abruptly stopped, to make a hurried investigation of their situation.

"Foller me round the cliff there, and when we kem on t'other side we'll hev the reds in the gully where we ken rub 'em out quicker'n Jack Jones!"

They had now returned to the neighborhood of Death Canyon, and in front was a distant connection of the cliff which formed the gloomy passway.

Acting upon the suggestion of The-Man-from-Texas, they diverged enough from their course to make the circuit of the ledge.

Without trouble they reached the other side, and as Rock had predicted they would have the Indians at their mercy, had not an unlooked-for discovery completely turned the tables.

As they passed around the spot, suddenly the Texan, who was in advance, beheld right in their course, less than twenty feet distant, a score of savages lounging about a smoldering camp-fire.

Still Rock had not been seen by them, and schooled as he was to just such surprises, he was not one to betray himself; thus they would doubtless have been able to escape had not Chauncy inadvertently struck a loose stone, which went crashing down the descent, falling into the very midst of the red-skins.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALPINE LUKE'S FATE.

To and fro swayed the trembling sapling which bore, suspended high in the air, the quivering form of Alpine Luke.

Gold-dust Buck and his followers, at last partially recovering from their terror, had left the vicinity, and, as far as he knew, no living being, save wild beasts, was in the valley.

The sufferings of the Unlucky Miner were indeed fearful; the suspense of his fate terrible.

Slowly the last ruddy light of day faded away and twilight soon darkened into night, when one by one he saw the starry gems of heaven stud the blue-arched sky, and still he was a helpless prisoner in that awful position.

He tugged at his bonds until weak and exhausted, only to fall back upon the stout thongs that held him, and wait, and pray, and hope.

Every moment laden with fearful agony, the time hardly seemed to move on.

Satisfied in his own mind that he had not a friend within miles and miles, he had refrained from crying for help and spared himself the pain.

Thus perhaps an hour passed, though it appeared like an age, when he was suddenly aroused to the sense of a new danger.

A blast of wind from the mountain moving the tree-tops swept the one upon which he hung against the branches of a giant oak but a few feet distant.

As this sapling finally struck the oak, the sullen growl of an angry beast sent a thrill of terror through his very soul.

Then he beheld, to his horror, a dark, crouching form extended at full length upon an out-reaching limb, while a pair of fiery eyes that glared and glowed in the semi-darkness like coals of fire were watching him with fierce intensity.

Mercy! he was in the very clutch of a huge cougar which, lashing the air with its long tail, seemed ready to spring upon him at any moment.

Evidently the animal must have been there all the time, but kept silent until aroused by the motion of the sapling.

Now, with every move of the forest foliage under the increasing wind, the animal grew wilder and more furious, until at any instant he might spring upon the unfortunate man, who would prove an easy victim.

The heart of Alpine Luke sunk within him. Brave and inured to dangers of almost every description as he was, he had never yet seemed so helplessly lost. Every move of the tree was but challenging death. He forgot the pains of the ligatures which were cutting into his flesh, and could only comprehend the deadly peril which must soon end all.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes wore away, and still the cougar had not left his perch, neither had the gleaming eyes left for even a moment their prey.

Oh, horror! anything to end that fearful suspense. Hark! what was that?

Upon the instant, wild yells and shrieks of madness were wafted to him. Then followed the report of firearms, instantly succeeded by a perfect Babel of sounds.

From the tumultuous confusion he momentarily felt that a fierce battle was going on in the valley below, but at the same time, he saw that the noise had sealed his own doom.

The panther still aroused to deeper anger by the startling sounds no longer remained inactive, but sniffing the air as if scenting blood, suddenly gave vent to a piercing scream, and, crouching close to its rest, prepared for the fatal spring.

Another gust of wind dashed the lithe sapling against the oak as if to hasten the crisis. Another cry, rising almost to a roar, and Alpine Luke felt a soul-sickening sensation dart through his being as he saw the enraged brute bound into mid-air, and, as for a moment the furious creature seemed suspended before his gaze, he instinctively closed his eyes to shut out the horrible vision.

A swift rush of air, a thud, and the beast had reached the tree-top; but as his body struck the

slender stem, too weak to bear the additional weight hurled so violently upon it, it shook and trembled from root to branch, and then with a crash, it was torn from the earth, as its body went reeling and smashing into the extended branches of a neighboring pine.

With a cry of terror, the unfortunate man, dazed and bewildered with his peril, felt himself borne swiftly downward for a single instant to be nearly stunned by the fearful shock of the collision; then followed the sharp crack of breaking wood, and midst louder crashing and with more blinding force, the top upon which he was lashed and upon which clung the now terrified cougar was broken off, when lightning-like the mass fell into the thick intersecting boughs below.

Luke felt a dim consciousness of going down, down through a dense mass of foliage and limbs, to fall at last upon the earth, torn, scarred and bruised.

The cougar had not descended to the ground, but catching upon the strong tree, still remained above, evidently too much frightened to care to pursue his warfare.

Shadow found that he was not severely hurt, as the force of the fall had been broken by the manner of his descent. Still his situation was but a little bettered. He was yet helpless, and high above him he could see the flashing eyes of the panther.

The noise and confusion of the battle could still be heard. Mingling with rifle-shots and the cries of white men he could distinguish the yells of Indians.

With renewed efforts he tried to break or loosen his bonds, until at last he found it useless.

Hopeless as seemed his situation succor was at last at hand.

In a few minutes his sensitive ears heard the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. No; not approaching, for they were passing a few rods away.

Hastily raising his head a trifle he was enabled to catch the glimpse of some one darting swiftly through the shadow of the forest.

Ready to risk all for the chance of its being a friend, Luke cried for help.

To his joy he was answered the next moment by the appearance of the person.

Almost rushing to the spot came the beautiful mute!

Alone!

Comprehending instantly the other's situation the girl-miner quickly seized a knife she carried and severed the ligatures which had so long bound him to his fearful position.

With the greatest difficulty Shadow staggered to his feet, and after repeated efforts so far overcame the numbness caused by the cramped imprisonment he had so long suffered, that he seemed himself once more.

Judge of his surprise when he found he owed his escape to a woman.

"Fair lady," he cried, in thankful tones, as soon as recovering sufficiently to speak, "you have my unbounded thanks and—"

Without heeding his words the other turned impatiently away, and pointed almost frantically toward the sound of strife.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, thinking he might understand her meaning, "there is a hotly-contested fight in the valley. Perhaps some of our countrymen are in peril. I would go to their aid, though I am unarmed."

Again unheeding, Alpine Luke's speech, the girl mute broke abruptly away; and, with a farewell wave of the hand, darted through the forest toward the hue and cry of battle.

Shadow followed in rapid suit.

CHAPTER IX.

RUNNING A GANTLET.

IN the meanwhile, how has it fared with our friends in the ravine who were so completely entrapped in the very hands of the bloodthirsty red-men.

As the savages sprung to their feet, they gave vent to their surprise in yells, fierce and unearthly.

Never before had Chauncy Clifford listened to the war-whoop of the forest savages and never had sound greeted his ears so frightfully.

Oft and oft before had The-Man-from-Texas listened to just such startling war-notes, and it was only for a breath that he lost his composure.

"Back, boyees!" he cried. "We must out o' this afore the varmints surround us."

Then the three turned to beat a hasty retreat.

Quick as was the action, they were too late.

A complete shower of bullets and arrows came; then the reds rushed forward in mad confusion, expecting to overwhelm the gallant trio at the first onset.

"Shoulder to shoulder, boyees!" shouted Dandy Rock; "and let yer powder burn!"

Three rifles spoke as one and as many of the savages bit the dust.

"Hurraw fer Texas!" yelled Rock, as he rammed another charge into his weapon. "Quick, this way, boyees, around the corner o' the ledge!"

Springing forward the three gained the partial protection of the cliff. The foremost Indians, demoralized by the fate of their leaders, sought cover at the first fire of the miners.

Still the whites were allowed no respite.

Making the woods fairly alive with their hideous shrieks they threw themselves pell-mell upon the scene.

The brave men dropped behind their stony breastwork: then they suddenly sprung to their feet, when again their death-dealing weapons spoke the doom of the leaders.

Then foe and foeman closed in deadly hand-to-hand combat.

"Look out fer yer top-knots, but don't gi'n the reds nary show," gritted Rock Randel, as drawing a brace of revolvers, he dashed into the contest. The others instantly followed, and the conflict was a mad medley of shouting and fighting.

Reckless Rock Randel, with a pistol in either hand, seemed to care no more for the red fiends than for prairie wolves; but the first shot that succeeded sent a crimson tide flowing from his arm. Still, unheeding the wound, he fought like the brave man he was.

Silver Ray and Chauncy, though unused to

warfare of this kind, showed themselves of true metal. Though with less display, they were no less valorous than The-Man-from-Texas.

More from the spirit of desperation than hope had our friends met the savages. Necessity had compelled them to accept the odds as inevitable.

At the first onset Silver Ray was sent rolling to the earth from the blow of a tomahawk. The same time Chauncy Clifford staggered back from the effect of a shot; but quickly rallying, he dashed to the side of Silver Ray, and the next instant the latter was again on his feet, dealing fiercer blows than ever.

The fight was too furious to last long. Only a quick dash and the cowardly red-skins, met by such unexpected defiance, began to quaver.

The practiced eye of Rock saw the wavering, and knowing the moment's advantage, with a war-whoop almost as wild as the Indians' own cries, he bounded upon them more resistless than ever. Never did man fight braver or bolder than this simple-hearted Texan.

Triumph!

Fairly awed by the intrepidity of the whites, the savages broke and fled in confusion for the cover of their ambush.

"Back to the rock!"

In a flash the three whites gained its protection.

"By Randel Rock!" exclaimed The-Man-from-Texas, "thet war work. Say, boyees, am yer top-knots all right?" he continued, as he picked up his rifle and began to reload it.

During the lull that followed, they had a partial chance to examine the injuries they had received.

Chauncy's wound promised the most serious, but even that would not disable him from further fighting.

Silver Ray felt some pain from the blow he had got on the head, though he declared he was none the worse for it.

As for Rock, he was "madder nor a stung hornet, and half-froze fer ha'r!" so he said, at least.

"Thar am deviltry afoot," muttered the Texan, as a few minutes passed without any show of hostility on the part of the Indians.

In the midst of the unusual quiet, Rock suddenly pressed his ear close to the side of the ledge, and after holding it there a while, he whispered to his companions:

"Boyees, I knowed the varmints war up to sum o' their riskality! Sum o' 'em hev clumb'd up on the cliff, and ar' a-crawlin' along to the edge up thar to rub us out like holed peccaries!"

What the quick ear of The-Man-from-Texas had first detected the others soon heard.

"What can we do?" asked Chauncy, anxiously.

"Thar am only one go fer us, and thet is like runnin' a gantlet. We can't hope to bu'st through the coyotes, fer thar am too many o' the red cusses; but we must all o' a suddint scout 'long the side o' the cliff, and jump down into the ravine. It can't be more'n ten feet, and 'tis our only chance."

The Texan was right. Should they remain where they were until the foe could reach the

edge of the rock, some fifteen feet above, it would be all up with them.

Speedily they prepared for the hazardous undertaking. None too soon. At the very moment, a plumed head appeared on the crest overhead.

"Quick, foller me!" hissed Rock, as he sprang forward to gain the ravine.

The others followed close upon his tracks; but as they left their concealment the savages, as if expecting and prepared for the movement, sent a volley of bullets after their retreating forms, yet too late to be effective.

Reaching the brink of the gorge in the twinkling of an eye, the excited trio found themselves upon an embankment of not less than twelve feet to the foot of it. With a defiant whoop and parting wave of the hand, Dandy Rock leaped recklessly down into the defile; and, as his broad sombrero shot downward, his companions followed at the great risk of neck and life.

"Hurraw!" roared Rock, "hyar am our animiles whar the pesky varmints hev corraled 'em! Let's mount and be off!"

Sure enough their horses had been secured here until the fight might be ended.

Each man looking to his own, the three quickly freed their beasts, and as a portion of the baffled red-skins reached the bank above, they dashed up the ravine for dear life, and leading the pack-mules by the lariat.

Dandy Rock's face lit with a broad smile of triumph as he fancied their certain escape; but suddenly his countenance fell.

The savages from the cliff comprehending the situation, rushed into the bottom *en masse*, and with blood-curdling yells sought to stay their flight.

Hemmed in on every hand, our miners could but advance. The red-skins saw it, and closed in upon them with cries of victory.

Answering yell for yell, still resolute and defiant, the whites dashed madly forward into the very vortex of death.

CHAPTER X.

DEAD.

As the miners plunged so madly forward, a shrill whistle instantaneously rung on the air, and as if by magic, the demoniac horde abruptly paused in their headlong charge.

White and red glancing expectantly up, were amazed at beholding the beautiful mute of the mines standing just back by the bank of the ravine. Near by was Alpine Luke, but every eye was turned toward the first.

In one hand she waved over her head a crimson plume, the sight of which caused the savages to fall instantly back and beat a hasty retreat.

Their progress undisputed now, the cavalcade rode quickly forward.

"By hookey!" exclaimed The-Man-from-Texas, "that gal has saved our top-knots, so kem on, boyees."

Without offering further molestation, the Indians hurried out of the ravine and quickly disappeared, while the three miners soon joined the fair girl and her companion.

"My gosh, purty one!" cried Rock, "gi'n us yer paw, fer I declar' ye ar' the best gal this side o' Texas, an' ef it warn't fer makin' Chaunce feel bad, I'd shine up to ye, wal, by hookey I would! Waghl!"

Allowing the rough but honest-hearted miner to hold her hand for a moment, it was then grasped by the others.

"I would I could express to her my thanks," was the thought in Chauncey Clifford's mind, and he added mentally, "I would lay down my life for her."

But the gratitude of the three must remain unspoken.

For a moment no one seemed to notice Shadow, as if he were a veritable shadow. Then suddenly Rock seemed to be aware of his presence, and glancing toward him he fell back, exclaiming aghast:

"The Unlucky Miner!"

Alpine Luke advanced with extended hands, saying quietly:

"Yes, Rock, and I trust we meet again as friends."

"Wal, I dunno!" replied The-Man-from-Texas in evident trepidation; "ye clean bu'sted yer-self down to Dog-town, and they say 'tis a bad sign to shake the paw o' an onlucky miner! Peg my shooter! but I should jess like to do it, but I'm mighty afeerd it would be the ruin o' me! Hope ye'll fergive me fer the disrespect!"

For the first time since he had come to the mines Shadow was seen to smile.

"I'm goin' to shake yer hand, old pard," avowed Silver Ray, advancing with a friendly recognition.

"Jess tech the fingers then!" whispered Rock; but I'll 'vise to steer cl'ar o' sich a chap."

Without heeding The-Man-from-Texas's warning, the old miner pressed with a hearty gripe the palm of the ill-omened Alpine Luke.

Then Chauncey was introduced to the stranger, after which he said:

"Shall we seek for cover for the night, boys, or rest out here in the open air?"

"Wal, my top-knot! Jehoosaphat! Whar am she a-goner?"

The girl-mute was gone!

During their greeting to Alpine Luke she had disappeared, unobserved by all.

"A singular being," said the Unlucky Miner, at length. "Is she the person reported to be deaf and dumb, who works at the Golden Cave with the blind miner?"

"Wal, she am," vouchsafed Randel, "and it am too plaguey bad, fer Chance hyer am awful smitten with her perty face."

"Oh, nonsense, Rock!" replied Clifford, though his confusion contradicted his words.

"Ef 'tain't so, ye needn't look so 'tarnal red in the face, boy," continued the facetious Randel. "Wal, arter all, I reckon thar am no great loss without some small gain; ye'll hev the consolation o' knowin' ye'll hev a woman who won't be likely to hev the last word. These wimmen-folks ar' pesky creetur's to talk. I 'member I hed one o' them onc't who could jess corral seven men and a boy blind. Lor'! she clean—"

"Never mind your domestic troubles until we find a camping-place, Rock," broke in Chauncey.

"Friends," said Alpine Luke, "I am but little

better off than you are, as I have but recently been despoiled of all my mining and camping utensils by a party of desperadoes from Gold-dust. There are some prospectors camped half a mile above here, unless they have returned to the city this afternoon, and I propose we join them for the night at least."

"Agreed," was the hearty response of the others; and soon the four, whose fortunes had been so singularly thrown together, were wending toward the expected camp.

In justice to Rock, we must say he felt ill at ease in the presence of Shadow, and did not at all like his company; but under his guidance, the camp-fire of the prospectors was soon discovered.

This new party consisted of half a dozen red-shirted, long-bearded men—true types of the California gold-hunters—who greeted the newcomers with a hearty welcome, all save the Un-lucky Miner. More than one head shook ominously at the appearance of the strangely-dreaded individual.

The prospectors had discovered ample evidence of the rich "lead" secreted in the valley, but, like The-Man-from-Texas, the wild stories they had heard of the hollow had so worked upon their superstitious fears, that a return to Gold-dust in the morning had been decided upon.

The arrival of the four, however, put a new face on the matter, and their courage rising proportionately to the addition of numbers, it was voted to remain and harvest the golden crop which had lain so long undisturbed.

Soon the merry collection were all seated around the encampment, and a little later, after the camp-fire yarns, which ever accompany a scene like that, had become wearisome, one after another sought the rest of sleep, save those who had volunteered to "stand guard."

The two watchers, wakeful and on the alert for indications of danger, were allowed time to "beat their vigil" without disturbance. When half the night had passed, they quietly aroused a couple of their comrades, and these latter accepting the trust of duty, the first laid down to a dreamless sleep.

Thus the night hours wore silently away, and once more the sheen of day lit the valley of gold.

Those first astir saw nothing out of the regular order, until at last when all the others had shaken off their drowsiness, it was seen that one still lay as if in repose.

Intending to make sport of their friend's sleepiness, the others hurried to his side, with jests and laughter upon their tongues. But as their gaze met the man's upturned face, mirth turned to awe and jokes to speechless horror.

The miner was stone dead!

Upon the slain one's temple was a tiny spot of crimson. Only that!

In terror the little knot of lookers-on stood in silence, one thought predominant in all minds, worded at last by The-Man-from-Texas, in a low, husky voice, as if the mere utterance was freighted with death:

"Charley Conway was shot by a silver bullet, by the Silent Rifleman!"

CHAPTER XI.

IS DANDY ROCK A THIEF?—GOLD-DUST BUCK'S DODGE.

THE mysterious death of their comrade cast a shadow over the spirits of the miners. With sad hearts they conveyed his lifeless body to the shallow grave. Then a vote was taken to see whether they should remain in the valley or return to the mines they had left below.

A majority signifying their intention to stay, the others quickly "fell in," and, putting on as bold a face as possible, the miners went to work with a will.

Chauncy soon found himself "at home" in his new situation; and though the wounds he had received had left him sore and stiff, he worked steadily at his pick and pan.

His companions, Rock and Silver Ray were "themselves" once more, and the good prospects at "Conway Camp," so called in respect to the dead, seemed assured.

That night they drew around their encampment with cheerful faces, and all, save Shadow, had some merry jest, or laughter-provoking story to tell.

"By hookey, boyees!" Dandy Rock was saying, "this jess puts me in mind o' old Texas. I reckon, too, we shall jess make our everlastin' fortins' ef that consarned spook don't jess bu'st our windpipes!"

"Do you believe in ghosts, Rock?" asked Alpine Luke.

"Believe in spooks!" cried The-Man-from-Texas, as if the question hardly admitted of a doubt. "Does I believe my rifle hes hind sights? Jumping painter! ef ye should see the moon turn somerset wouldn't ye believe yer own eyes? and when I see a real, live spook jess tearin' right fer me— Good Lord! is he comin'?"

In a moment a hushed stillness fell upon the camp.

As if in answer to Rock's words the loud and hurried tramp of feet was heard rushing through the growth, and coming directly toward them.

Every man seized his rifle and waited in breathless anticipation.

An instant and then a new-comer dashed upon the scene. With a wild, woe-begone expression on his face, the man abruptly paused in their midst, like a hunted beast of prey suddenly cornered.

"Don't shoot fer mercy's sake!" he groaned. "Save me, or I am a goner!"

Then, as if too much overcome by some unaccountable terror, he broke down.

"Speak!" cried Chauncy Clifford, "and tell us what the trouble is!"

"Oh, my! I see'd him! The awfulest critter as ever these eyes looked upon. He war goin' to—"

The sentence was never finished. With the last word upon his lips, the stranger suddenly staggered forward and fell, without even a groan, to the earth.

Paralyzed with dread, it was some moments before any one had the power to move.

At last Alpine Luke stepped forward, and turning the unknown's form upward, it was seen that he was dead, and a wound upon the temple told the rest.

The next instant Luke dashed fearlessly into the growth below, to find, if possible, some trace of the murderer. But later he came back from a fruitless mission.

The dead miner, for such his garb proclaimed him to be, was recognized by Chauncy and his companions as one of Gold-dust Buck's crew.

By the side of poor Charley Conway was dug a rude grave for the stranger, and in the weird moonlight his body was forever covered from mortal eyes.

Little sleep visited the camp that night. An extra guard was put on, if possible to prevent a repetition of what had occurred the night preceding; and the gray light of dawn brought relief to the discomfited miners, when they found their number all safe.

Need we dwell upon that day? Fascinated by the charm of gold, the miners determined to hazard a longer stay; but more than one heart began to fail, and strange as it may seem, already murmurs were made against the presence of the Unlucky Miner. To him the others had commenced to attribute the singular misfortune surrounding them; while seeming unconscious of the storm he was so innocently provoking, he worked as steadily and unconcernedly as ever.

Not far from noon the party were surprised by the appearance of Gold-dust Buck and Frisco Frank.

"We discovered your presence, and thus thought we would visit you," the leader said.

To the original members of Conway Camp the arrival of Warner was hailed with delight.

Chauncy and his friends appeared at least polite toward the other; but Alpine Luke did not seem to notice him.

"Gracious!" ejaculated Frisco Frank to himself, as he saw the Unlucky Miner, "thar is thet Shadow alive, or I'm a p'izened Injun!"

Buck Warner had already seen his foe, but whatever his thoughts were, he carefully repressed all emotions of alarm.

"So, ho!" he exclaimed to Chauncy, "so *you* still remain in the valley? But have any of you seen aught of a man this way since last night? One of our number left camp yesterday, and we have not seen him since. I fear something has befallen him, or he has become frightened and gone back to Gold-dust."

"War he a tall chap, with chipper eyes?" asked Dandy Rock.

"He was quite tall."

"An' wabbled when he walked? That is, he had stuttrin' feet."

Stifling a smile, Buck replied:

"Have you seen any one this way?"

"Wal, I reckon he lays out thar, jess under that pile o' dirt!"

"What! is he dead?"

"Wal, I reckon ef he hain't he will be! We dug his funeral last night, but we don't brag o' the job, 'cos we done it by moonlight, and were 'tarnal scart!"

Gold-dust Buck was amazed.

"Boys," he said, hoarsely, "there is some power back of all this, which we have either got to probe or levant the valley. At our camp Wolverine went under so, and I more than half expected Hal had gone the same way. Now we

must either remove one way or another this unseen foe, or make up our minds to leave all this gold to smarter men. I, for one, am determined to stay until I am driven out."

This bold declaration was hailed with satisfaction. At the end of the consultation it was again decided to remain, and Buck Warner, with his followers, was to join those at Conway Camp. Accordingly, Frisco Frank went back to their encampment on Silverstone for Stockton Sharp and the others.

We cannot say that Chauncy and his companions were gratified with this decision, but for policy's sake they silently submitted.

Alpine Luke was totally unheeded, though perhaps no one there better understood the situation.

It was formally agreed that "the camp" should share the results of their labor—that is, be equally divided among the respective diggers.

Gold-dust Buck seized a pick, and, entering the bottom, worked steadily with the others.

Soon, however, an occurrence was destined to disturb the peace of the encampment.

Glancing up from his work, Dandy Rock saw Warner slip a nugget into his pocket, and, later still, another. Without speaking of it, The-Man-from-Texas saw this repeated at every interval the renegade miner could improve without being detected.

Silently biding his time, the Texan plied his pick and watched.

Toward night Frisco Frank returned, and with him came the party from Silverstone, bringing all that belonged to their camp.

Then Conway Camp had swelled to a goodly size.

At the close of the day's work when the toilers "lumped" together the precious ore they had dug, Rock Randel noted every movement of the man he so deeply hated, Gold-dust Buck.

"Look-a-hyar!" The-Man-from-Texas cried, as the golden treasure was about to be divided; "I reckon, Buck Warner, ye hev fergot what ye put in yer pockets!"

The sudden words cut the other to the very quick, as he exclaimed hotly:

"What do you mean, dog of a Texan?"

"Ye may. I'arn what I mean, ef ye hain't mighty keerful. I'm jess spilin' fer sum fun! Buck Warner, ye hev pocketed sum dust thet ye don't fork over 'cording to 'greement, and I jess want ye to hand it out."

"You lie, Rock Randel. I have no ore in my pockets. Give me another word and you shall eat them!"

"Jehosaphat!" cried Dandy Rock, excitedly; "jess hold my hat, boyees, while I dig the coyote's funeral!"

CHAPTER XII.

FRISCO FRANK'S TURN.

Rock meant business, and Gold-dust Buck saw it. The Texan was a different man from what he wished to arouse, and accordingly, he quickly said:

"Pardon me, Rock; perhaps I was hasty. But you are most assuredly mistaken if you think I have any gold concealed about me."

"You have," reiterated The-Man-from-Texas, confidently; "and you hev got to fork it over, or thar'll be a funeral dug."

"Look here, Rock Randel, I have pocketed no ore. 'Tis you who are the thief, and I can prove it!"

Dandy Rock drew his revolvers, and he betrayed an unusual excitement.

"Buck Warner," he began, "jess take back 'em words, or one o' us mus' pass in our checks!"

"Bah! if you haven't any gold ore about you then I will eat my words, but not otherwise. Will you allow yourself to be searched?"

"When you have," answered Rock, defiantly.

"Very well; to prove the truth, I submit. Here, Silver Ray and Frisco Frank, search me."

The miners chosen did as they were asked; but to the surprise of The-Man-from-Texas, nothing was found to prove his assertion.

"Now," exclaimed Gold-dust Buck, exultantly, "search him."

Then in turn, Buck allowed the two to examine himself; but the first pocket Silver Ray thrust his hand into contained—what?

With an involuntary cry, the old miner drew from the depth a nugget of gold! He turned to the crowd, as if hoping they had not seen it.

"Now, what do you say to stealing, Sir Man-from-Texas?" leered Warner, triumphantly.

Rock was dumfounded.

"Who's the one to mark now?" continued Buck.

"Lynch him!" cried Stockton Sharp, taking the hint from his leader. "We ar' men as deal on the squar', and we hain't a-goin' to let this cuss from Texas steal our rights!"

"Jest so, I say," chimed in Frisco Frank.

"Wal, I reckon ye ar' a dog-goned pack o' coyotes, eunnyway," blurted Rock. "I didn't steal yer stuff, but sum chap or other jess put it into my pockets to kick up a row! Wal, kem on! I reckon Rock Randel 'll cie game!"

"Fool!" cried Gold-dust Buck, "be careful, or you will get a swing!"

"Yes, up with him!"

And others took up the cry, till the Texan seemed in imminent danger.

"Hold on, boys!" cried Chauncy Clifford, going to the rescue of his friend; "there is some mistake. I do not believe Mr. Randel would attempt anything of the kind you accuse him of doing. I have as much interest here as any one, and I say let Rock Randel have a fair chance. At least, you cannot and shall not resort to the extreme measure you propose. At the most, you can only oblige him to leave the camp."

Seeing that a more violent course was likely to lead to a serious outbreak, Buck Warner said:

"Let a vote be given to see if The-Man-from-Texas shall stay any longer with us. If a majority is counted against him, then, of course, if he don't leave, we will make him. Ready for your word, boys. I say he must go!"

Gold-dust Buck's followers voted solidly with him, while those of Conway Camp were as strongly for Rock. The latter numbered one

the most, and thus the Texan was allowed to remain.

"Very well," affirmed Warner, submitting with as good grace as he could muster. "I agree with the majority; only I would advise Mr. Randel to be a little more honest in the future."

"Peg my buttons!" muttered Rock, "I'm half-froze fer his top-knot! Say, Chaunce, old boy, jess stand by and let me go to his funeral!"

"Don't, Rock," admonished Clifford; "keep quiet, awhile at least. It will only make a general fight, and that at present is not desirable. I dislike him equally with you, but we must bide our time."

The caution had its effect and Dandy Rock finally swallowed his rage, and once more affairs assumed a quiet aspect in the camp. Still the fire had only been stifled, and the slumbering coals might spring into a blaze at the first breath of wind.

Alpine Luke had kept aloof from the others, and taken no part in the controversy. The stranger miner seemed to feel his presence was not desired, yet for reasons of his own he persistently stayed.

That night the camp again slept with a double guard.

Resting in fancied security the tired miners had almost immediately fallen into slumber.

Turning uneasily under his blanket, Chauncy Clifford was awakened at midnight by the change of the watchmen. A little after he was surprised to see Gold-dust Buck and Frisco Frank arise cautiously from the earth, and, seemingly unheeded by the guard, hurry away up the valley.

Wondering what it meant, Chauncy finally decided to follow, if possible, without being detected.

Improving his opportunity when the guards were not looking, he noiselessly edged his way to the outskirts of the undergrowth, and once in the shade of the forest he was soon following on the course of the others.

He found but little difficulty in pursuing Warner and his confederate after he had fairly got in sight of them.

Their course lay in the direction of the Golden Cave, and, more mystified than ever, in regard to the proceedings of Gold-dust Buck, he continued after him with increased anxiety.

At last the twain paused.

In the pale moonlight Chauncy had no trouble in identifying it as the locality where he and his friends had discovered the blind miner and the fair mute.

Crawling along under cover of the stunted growth which clung on the edge of the ravine, he was enabled to get within earshot of the precious pair of villains.

Before him was plainly visible the entrance to the cave, and even in the semi-darkness he could distinguish the diggings of the old Californian.

But hark!

Suddenly he heard the steady stroke of a miner's pick-ax—ay, half a dozen of them. Then, as he listened, other sounds became audible, and he even fancied he could hear the hum of voices.

Ah! the stories of the Golden Cave were not without foundation. Surely diggers were at work in the place, but, of course, he scouted the idea of their being other than mortal workers.

Chauncy's attention was then arrested by the men in front.

"Hist!" exclaimed Frisco Frank; "d'ye hear that?"

"Yes," replied Gold-dust Buck, in a low tone, though distinctly heard by the listener. "Frisco Frank, there is a body of miners at work in that cave. The story about its being haunted is bosh, gotten up to frighten others away."

"Then ye ar' detarmined to go fur the claim?"

"Of course I am. Something must be done to get rid of that Alpine Luke, and those infernal meddlers from Dry-town, Dandy Texas and his chums. Once those four are disposed of we can whip in the others, when we can get possession of the cave, and our fortunes are made."

"You bet!" assented the one from Frisco. "Uv course ye and me are to hev the biggest share o' the yaller stuff, 'cos we are the chaps es does the work arter all."

"Our plans are all straight. Come, have you decided to ring a flat on that Shadow?"

"Wal, I drea'd to tech him; but ef Stockton Sharp passes the ticket-of-leave to that Yankee, Chaunce Clifford, I am snuff for the other."

"All right, then. Sam will have laid him out before we get back. So that is settled. But, let's get a little nearer to the mouth of the cavern, so that we can distinguish the entrance more accurately."

Chauncy could not help shuddering as the ruffians so coolly planned their nefarious work. But he drew a breath of relief as he thought of his own narrow escape, and realized that, with the knowledge he had so unexpectedly gained, the desperadoes might yet be baffled.

Gold-dust Buck and his tool arose to their feet, to proceed up the valley; but Frisco Frank had barely reached an upright position, when a low cry escaped his lips, and throwing up his hands, he reeled backward, falling heavily to the earth.

Warner turned in alarm. Then catching sight of the ashen-hued face of his friend, he gazed in awe for a moment upon the motionless form, and then actually fled in terror.

After a minute, Chauncy nervously approached the body, to find it lifeless, with that fatal drop of crimson oozing out upon the temple!

Spellbound he gazed upon the mark of death. What was the meaning of this warfare?

Often had he seen the fatal work of the destroyer, but never, it seemed to him, in so fearful a guise as that of the mysterious Silent Slayer, whose weapon was charged with silver bullets. Whose turn would come next; and were all in Gold-dust Hollow included in the rifleman's death-roll?

For a time he could not shake off the paralysis of the dread which seemed to have taken possession of his being.

At last, however, he rallied, and with a half-frightened expression upon his countenance, turned to leave the fated spot, eager to get away, when, looking up, he saw standing only a few feet distant, the beautiful mute of the mines!

CHAPTER XIII.

ALPINE LUKE LEVANTS!

CHAUNCY CLIFFORD started back with an involuntary cry as he suddenly beheld the fair girl.

Near her side, and holding her hand, was the blind miner.

"A truce, friends," cried the confused young man; "but your unexpected presence startled me."

"Oh-ho!" retorted the Californian, quickly, "then we have another intruder in Calvo's Valley of gold! But stay; I have heard your voice before."

"Very likely," replied Chauncy, at a loss for words.

"What! Have you so disobeyed my warning? If I mistake not, others have done the same! Answer me truly, are not others in the hollow?"

"I shall not deny it, sir."

"But I would ask, why are you so foolhardy? 'Tis death to remain in this place!"

As if in emphasis to the words, the mute pointed to the body of Frisco Frank.

Chauncy shuddered, more from that silent expression than the words. At length he replied:

"You cannot fail to know the reason. There is gold here."

"But, there is enough where you need not steal it! I own all this valley, and every man who comes here for my treasure is a robber!"

"Pardon me, kind sir, but I claim to be an honest man," faltered Chauncy.

"Then why do you not obey my request, and leave this valley?"

This question, simple and straightforward as it was, seemed too much for answer.

"If I admit the truth," the young miner managed to say, "I shall have to acknowledge that it is as much to learn the mystery of the hollow as anything."

The old man started in confusion, but soon answered:

"The greater your folly, then! There is less of mystery, than of wrongs and crimes in the history of this valley. One year ago, I had two stalwart sons and as many nephews who were to share with me the wealth of this mine. But robbers and murderers came to take away our rightful own. We resisted, and behold the result; a pile of bones bleaching in Death Canyon; the survivors of the scene an old blind wreck of a man, and his daughter, deaf and dumb!"

"Can so angelic a being be so unfortunate?" cried Chauncy, in great earnestness, evidently more interested in the girl than the narrator.

"Even the fairest and the purest are not spared when the hand of the ruthless destroyer has gained its hold!" replied the Californian sadly.

"From the depth of my heart I pity her!" said Chauncy impulsively. "She has saved my life more than once, and I would I could express my undying gratitude!"

The old man waved his hand as he hastened to say:

"Enough, Sir Stranger; you know all there is to know of Calvo Valley. You appear honest,

and thus I would that you might heed my final warning. The ore in this hollow is cursed, and only my child and myself are permitted to stay, as we are of the rightful owners. No other person can live to carry one grain of the Calvo gold out of Gold-dust Hollow! Attempt it, and your life will be the forfeit! Go! go! while you can!"

The girl-miner had thus far remained motionless, but now, with a graceful move of the arm, she waved Chauncy an adieu, and turning sharply around, led her father rapidly away.

Half bewildered by the strange events, the young miner continued to look after the departing couple, his mind more in a maze than ever.

Suddenly his heart gave a thrill of delight as he saw the fair mute cast a last lingering look ere they disappeared.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, half-aloud, "if I possessed all the treasure in Gold-dust Hollow, I would give it to know the mystery of that beautiful being's life."

As once more Chauncy became really conscious of what was passing around him, he heard again the sound of miners at work in Golden Cave.

"I would explore that place be the risk what it might," he thought; "but, as it is, I must hasten back to camp, for I do not care for my absence to be discovered."

Rapidly retracing his course, Chauncy soon reached the encampment to find there a scene of excitement and confusion.

Mingling with the crowd, feeling that he had not been missed, he soon learned in amazement that another of their number had been shot down in silence by a silver bullet.

Dread intense seized upon the hearts of the terrified miners.

One of the guards avowed that he had seen a wild-looking being, of the form of a man, but with the visage of a demon, whose eyes burned like balls of fire, dart away through the forest as his companion fell.

As soon as they could muster their courage sufficiently a general reconnaissance was decided upon. Then the non-appearance of Frisco Frank was discovered.

Gold-dust Buck offered no explanation, and of course, Chauncy considered it policy for him to be "mum."

New terror possessed the startled throng; but as there was more need for a search, they were soon hunting the woods in every direction.

The body of Frisco Frank was at length found cold and stark. Warner had purposely led them in that way. With the discovery all further investigation was stopped. They dared not follow it up longer; and with pale faces they returned.

"I tell ye, boys," said a gray-headed miner, with a nervous shake of the head, "that all our trouble kem through thet Shadder. Something is alwus wrong whar he am!"

Strange that in their trouble they should try to make one responsible for it all, and on such an unreasonable ground, too. But it was even so, and soon Alpine Luke himself began to realize it. Still he carelessly plied his pick, and appeared as unconcerned as ever.

Nothing occurred that day to disturb the

diligent miners at their work; but as the time passed, their bronzed faces bore a look of disappointment, and gradually they grew moody and silent. The "luck" of their previous labors seemed to have deserted them. What had promised a rich "lead" was proving a delusion.

"Consarn it!" growled Stockton Sharp; "it all kems o' thet Shadder. He's p'izened the lead! and ef he don't leave, I'll bu'st his head—that I will!"

The words were purposely loud enough, though spoken in an undertone, for the Unlucky Miner's ears.

"Look here, Sam Sharp!" exclaimed Alpine Luke, in a cold, metallic tone, resting for a moment upon his pick; "I have heard enough of your barking. If I am your debtor in any way, just come out here and we will settle it beyond dispute."

"Tain't that!" ejaculated the desperado, somewhat abashed by the other's abrupt retort; "but your consarned picter has scart all the ore out o' the claim."

"Are you a fool, Stockton Sharp?" asked Luke, quickly.

"None of yer bizness ef I am! But I hain't so looney but I see thet ye hev been the cause o' all our tribulashions."

"Perhaps you think I am accountable for the death of our friends?"

Sharp saw that he seemed to have the sympathy of the crowd, when he hastened to say:

"Ye dar'n't deny it, Shadder!"

Alpine Luke, seeing the storm which was rising, hesitated to speak.

"Why don't ye yawp?" taunted another of the throng.

"Cos I talk on the squar'," continued Stockton Sharp. "I knowed, the minnit he kem to camp, we war a goner. He bu'sted the Dry-town Mine; made a smash o' the Dry-creek Lead; stove in the Silver Mountain Lode; bumped old Cross-eye's claim in Smoky Gulch; and now, arter all his mischief in 'em places and forty others, he's kem hyar to bring us sorrer! I tell ye, boys, I don't keer what ye think: but to me, it jess makes my blood b'ile! I say, let's rope the sneakin' upstart."

Gold-dust Buck winked to the one who had broken in before, when that enterprising worthy bawled out:

"Yas; 'em's my figgers! Ten foot o' lariat and a good swing! Ha! ha!"

Warner smiled, for in truth he was at the bottom of it all. Fearing as he did the other's presence, he had determined that by fair means or foul the Unlucky Miner should leave the claim.

Alpine Luke stepped from the pit he was digging, and as he did so drew a couple of revolvers, while saying in a matter-of-fact way:

"Stockton Sharp, I am ready for that rope!"

Amazed by the man's coolness, the one from Stockton in turn hesitated.

"Lemme the job!" cried the other spokesman. "I'll flop him!" and springing to his feet, he seized a rusty firearm lying near at hand, as if resolved to carry out his threat.

"Hold!" commanded Shadow. "At least I deserve fair treatment, and I will have it or some of you will lose your heart's blood!"

The braggart paused.

Gold-dust Buck said:

"We do not wish to resort to violent measures, but the welfare of the camp demands that you leave—and if you don't the consequence will be your own."

Without looking at the speaker, or seeming to hear his words, Luke turned to the startled crowd.

"Gentlemen," he said, in his candid, pleasant way; "if you fancy my being in your midst has an evil influence on your 'run,' or from any other fair reason you desire me to leave I am ready to do so at once, without any opposition when respectfully requested to that effect. But," he added, in that clear, ominous tone, so often his, "the man don't live who can drive me out of Conway Claim." There was that earnestness in his speech which told that only death could force the speaker from his purpose.

"Of course we wish to follow an honorable method," said Warner. "I call for a vote."

"Gentlemen," cried Chauncy Clifford, "this is unjust. Luke Raymond has as good a right here as any of us."

At the bold words an angry cry of dissent went up from the others, showing plainly the peril of the Unlucky Miner, or any who should intercede in his behalf.

"Thank you for those words, Clifford," Shadow said; "but I wish for an expression from the boys, and if it is their wish, I am ready to go. This is at best a dead claim."

Then followed the call of names, and to his own every miner responded for Alpine Luke's departure, save Chauncy and Silver Ray.

"All right, boys," Luke answered, cheerfully. "I hope you will have better success after I am gone."

Within an hour the Unlucky Miner had gathered up his few things, and after shaking the hands of his friends, he bid adieu to all at Conway Camp.

Would fortune change now? Were they safe from the Silent Rifleman?

Be it as it would, the majority breathed easier.

CHAPTER XIV.

SILVER RAY'S LOST RACE.

UPON the departure of Alpine Luke, Chauncy decided in his own mind to follow his example. Accordingly, at the first opportunity, he communicated to Silver Ray what he had heard in the ravine the night before; when the latter expressed his willingness to abandon the company of the others.

Rock was found to be more than willing to go. In fact, The-Man-from-Texas was desperately sick of the whole affair. To leave Conway Camp was one step, he felt, toward getting out of Gold-dust Hollow.

However, it was decided among themselves to spend another night in the place.

The Silent Rifleman spared the camp that night, and the miners, now satisfied that the unlucky Shadow Hand was the cause of their previous troubles, entered upon their day's labor with a hearty good-will.

Great surprise was expressed when Chauncy made known the decision of himself and friends to leave the claim. But a few, however, offered regrets, for the followers of Gold-dust Buck were working for that very end, and the leader was jubilant.

Soon after, the friends having secured their "camp-kit" and mining utensils, mounted their animals, and, headed toward Gold-dust "City," rode down the valley.

Before bidding final adieu to Conway Camp, as we must, to follow the fortunes of the trio, we beg to linger a moment.

Gold-dust Buck's object in joining these others had been to discourage, and finally, by "hock or crook," to get all out of the Hollow who would not acknowledge him as a leader in whatever he had undertaken. Surely everything was turning in his favor.

That day the miners tried their luck further up the valley, but without better success.

"It am a dead claim," said one, in a tone of bitter disappointment.

Warner did not hesitate to second the declaration, and even proposed to abandon the "lead."

When morning came again, Buck Warner had no need to speak his wish.

Another victim lay in Conway Camp, with a silver bullet in his brain!

Terror seized the living, and it was then decided to "pull stakes."

Without delay the terrified miners prepared to leave, and before noon, the camp was deserted.

A part turned for the "city," and did not pause till the "Valley of Death"—as they termed it—was left far behind.

Warner, still holding under his control the bravest of his followers, resolved to gain possession of Golden Cave, which had been his aim since the first.

Let us now follow the career of Chauncy, and, in doing that, we shall find how well the arch-demon succeeded.

It was only a ruse on the part of the three friends in starting for Gold-dust, for before they had proceeded far they changed completely their course, and went up the valley.

"It will bu'st us!" remonstrated Dandy Rock, who was opposed to the plan.

Silver Ray and Chauncy, however, were determined, and The-Man-from-Texas was compelled to join in the enterprise.

Could the others have read the future, perhaps the Texan would have had his way!

After an hour's time they halted.

The "prospect" was good.

"We can't do better," said Ray.

"Golden Cave must be near here," replied Chauncy, "and it's my idea to explore it as soon as possible. But we can 'set our sticks' here until we have that opportunity."

Accordingly their animals, hobbled, were allowed to clip the long grass that grew among the rocks, while they "staked camp."

The day passed quietly enough, and they were well satisfied with its results. Evidently they had struck rich deposit.

Near sunset Rock espied a flock of mountain sheep up the hillside, and "half-froze" for

"new" meat, he set out, accompanied by Silver Ray, to shoot 'one or two, while Chauncey remained behind in camp.

The-Man-from-Texas and his companion, rifles in hand, advanced cautiously toward the timid animals browsing the green foliage from the stunted growth that clung to the rugged foothills.

"Now, jess keep yer peepers open and we'll hev a supper fer Chaunce as will make him think o' thet eastern home o' his," Rock was saying as they slowly continued their course.

A little later they were conversing behind a clump of fir-trees within easy rifle range.

"Now fer them sleek critters jess ahead! gracious! they look almost too pretty and innercent-like fer sich rough galoots as me and you to kill. But, hyar goes!"

As Rock was raising his weapon, suddenly the very animals he was admiring and was about to slay, dropped to the earth, and quivering for a moment straightened their limbs in the rigidity of death.

The others of the flock, unheeding the fall of a portion of their number kept on quietly feeding, when again in the same mysterious way a couple more fell to the ground, to all appearance lifeless.

Still the remainder of the lot was undisturbed.

The-Man-from-Texas lowered his rifle with a puzzled expression upon his countenance.

"Jeems Stupple! ef thet ain't queer! Don't fer the Lord's sake, shoot, Ray, but let's git up and git afore we find ourselves a goner. Thar am spooks round, or I warn't called fer Randel Rock!"

Silver Ray less frightened than his companion, shook his head, and after waiting a moment again raised his rifle as if determined to hazard a shot.

At that instant the sheep suddenly threw up their heads and scenting the air for a breath turned and fled for dear life.

Nothing appeared in sight to account for their sudden flight; and vexed at the delay in firing, Silver Ray said:

"By the big horn spoon, we hev fooled away a boss shot! But I am going up thar to find what ar' the matter with 'em as lay so still."

Quickly arising, he was about to carry out his intentions, when Rock caught him by the arm, saying:

"Don't! Let's dig for the bottom, and then huf it fer Gold-dust. I tell ye I hev got 'nough o' this place!"

Before Silver Ray could reply, some one was heard rushing through the bushes near at hand.

Breathless the twain listened. Rock's hair fairly lifted his broad sombrero from his head, he was so—well, what? Was so bold a hunter frightened?

"Look!" he gasped; "it am a livin' spook! No! dance me barefoot on a hot iron, ef 'tain't that ar' gal!"

True enough, the beautiful mute came slowly across the clearing below, moving like one in deep meditation.

"Gosh! ain't she a screamer!" muttered The-Man-from-Texas, as he watched her intently.

"Let's skip out in sight; I am goin' to speak to her."

With the words Silver Ray left the thicket, and approached the maiden.

"Pesky, but she'll talk with ye, I reckon!" declared Rock, as he followed.

The mute, suddenly aroused from her apparent reverie by the abrupt appearance of the miners, started in alarm, and then fled like a frightened fawn.

"Gracions!" cried Silver Ray; "I am goin' to know where she goes to!" and without hesitation he darted down the hillside in pursuit.

"Sam Smasher!" groaned Dandy Rock, and for a while he seemed too much overcome to move. Then finding his companion was fast leaving him, he dashed wildly after him.

Silver Ray was a fleet runner, but it taxed his utmost exertions to keep in sight of the girl miner.

Down into the valley, along the ravine, which was here broadest and of less depth, through thorny undergrowth and over huge piles of bowlders, fled the mountain sprite, while near behind rushed the pursuer, and still further to the rear, following in a hang-dog trot, was The-Man-from-Texas.

At an unexpected instant the fleeing mute disappeared, seeming to have vanished from sight.

With a cry of surprise, Silver Ray bounded more swiftly forward, when, reaching the spot, he found that the high rock which jutted out from the cliff which reared itself at his right, here turned an abrupt angle.

Beyond he saw the archway entrance to what seemed a cavern. As he sprung around the corner, he fancied he had a glimpse of the girl darting into the place.

Excited by the heedless race, he still kept madly on toward the spot.

A wild cry of warning rung from the lips of Rock Randel,

Without comprehending its meaning, Silver Ray still rushed wildly forward.

"My God! he's a goner!" gasped the Texan. Then, forcing back the terror he felt, he sprung ahead at almost lightning speed.

Just as Rock reached the angle, he saw his companion dash into the cave.

"Stop!" he shrieked, "or you ar' a-goner!"

Too late!

At the very moment the white face of the miner was turned backward, with a wild, haggard look upon the countenance. An instant it shone in the semi-darkness, then his arms were upturned, and Silver Ray, with a cry of despair, went swiftly downward until lost to sight!

Rock's own countenance blanched to a deadly hue as he ran near to the spot, but cautiously paused before he had reached the opening.

He gazed wildly about him, but not a trace could be seen of his friend.

Before him the ground extended back till lost in the darkness of the cavern, level and smooth, without any explanation for the sudden disappearance. A solid wall of granite marked either side.

"Poor Silver Ray!" cried Rock, "he am a goner! But he ain't the fu'st one thet I know of

who hes tried to cross the 'Line of Death' and lost his life."

The sound of a distant cry caused Randel to pause. He listened; a prolonged yell, the war-whoop of the red-men, was then borne to his ears.

It came from no very great distance."

"By Randel Rock! thar am lively bizness ahead, or my name ain't Rock Randel! I'll bet the mountain eagle Chaunce am in trouble! Come, Rock, old 'coon, show 'em how ye used to do it in old Texas!"

Then he was hurrying toward the spot where he had left his friend, our hero.

CHAPTER XV.

THE "SPOOKS" OF GOLDEN CAVE.

As Rock hurried down the valley he heard rifle reports following each other in rapid succession, with deafening yells and shrieks.

"Jimmy Sneezer! it am all up with Chaunce!" and he rushed forward with increased speed, rifle in hand.

As The-Man-from-Texas advanced it became apparent that the ravine was fairly alive with savages.

The red demons had attacked Chauncey.

After the departure of his friends he had secured the animals for the night, and was waiting for the trio to return, when chancing to glance across the creek, he saw the plumed head of a red-skin behind the bushes and a pair of snake-like eyes narrowly watching him.

Hardly knowing what to do, but feeling an uncomfortable dread he remained quiet for a moment, and it soon disappeared.

Carelessly arising, he started to approach the horses. He had scarcely taken three steps, however, when a half-dozen swart forms sprung from their concealment. A shot rung on the air and a ball sped past his head within a hair's breadth. Then a series of discordant yells, and he was surrounded by the bloodthirsty imps.

Quick as thought he seized his rifle and sprung into the ravine just in season to escape a volley of bullets. At the same moment the savages followed.

Looking wildly back he saw at least a score of the dusky fiends, and he could hardly realize that he beheld at their head Gold-dust Buck!

"Look a-here, youngster," shouted Warner, "you had better surrender. If you don't we will riddle you with lead!"

Without pausing to answer the threat, Chauncey ran up the bottom as fast as possible, keeping his person partially hidden by the thick foliage of the undergrowth.

Shrieking out their wrath in unearthly screams the infuriated Indians pursued.

Suddenly the bushes parted and a man leaped into the course ahead!

Chauncey half-raised his weapon before he recognized The-Man-from-Texas.

"Ho! boyee!" shouted Rock, "ye are streakin' it like mad!"

"The whole valley is full of Indians, led by Buck Warner!"

"Jehosaphat! then we've got to huf it like Satan on ice!"

Another volley from the pursuing savages succeeded.

A rifle ball went plump through the Texan's sombrero.

"Hyar! take thet fer yer imperdence!" yelled Randel, and quickly sighting the foremost red, with a cry of pain, the "varmint" bit the dust.

"Wagh, Chaunce! foller this old 'coon;" and with mighty strides The-Man-from-Texas led the way.

Wilder yells from the horde in pursuit and the mad race went on.

In the excitement of the moment Chauncey had not noticed the absence of Silver Ray, but as they finally distanced the red-skins, he cried:

"Where's Silver Ray?"

"Gone under!"

"What?"

"He's checked hisself fer the other kingdom. Ye see, we run'd acrost that ar' gal, and Ray jess took arter her like blazes. All of a suddint she 'vaporated, which proves she war a speerit sart'in. But Ray, detarmined to end his days, jess kept on, and seeing the entrance to a cave, he plunked fer it, and perished in the 'Line o' Death, which makes it impossible to git into the cave thar, and we must leave the gorge soon, or we shall run plump into the Golden Cave!" panted Rock.

"Can we do any better than to seek its protection?" asked Chauncey.

"We must! I'd rather dance a cart wheel on the Old Boy's oven than to fling my topknot 'mong 'em spooks!"

"Hough-ogh-o-oo!"

A horde of red-skins, brandishing tomahawks and scalping-knives, dashed from their concealment from above, and came crashing down the embankment upon either side.

Answering yell for yell, the wild Texan clubbed his rifle and plunged into their midst. Chauncey Clifford was not slow to follow, and the twain were momentarily lost in the conflict.

Gold-dust Buck and his band, hearing the outcry and knowing their allies had entrapped the hunted miners, they rushed pell-mell to the scene.

Sweeping the savages down right and left, Rock and his companion dashed wildly through the cordon of men.

Had the Indians been armed with rifles the fugitives must have fallen at the first onset. But the courage of only two determined men, though pitted against overwhelming numbers, will often wrest victory out of the jaws of seeming defeat.

So it was with the twain. Acting upon the instant with lightning rapidity, they had turned the tide of battle at the first dash.

The red-skin's, hurled back, and their cries of triumph turned to yells of rage in the twinkling of an eye, tried to regain what they had lost by cutting off the course of the whites.

Death paid the penalty of the foremost. Ere others could take the place, the gallant miners cleared the ambush and escaped before Warner could reach the spot,

The next moment they came suddenly upon an ore bed, and right before them appeared the mouth of the Golden Cave.

"We are a goner," was all that Rock could say.

The cries of their enemies had ceased for the moment, and perhaps they had abandoned the pursuit. No, they could not hope for that.

"We have got either to prepare to meet the horde here, or seek safety in the cavern. We cannot expect to escape in a fight, and I prefer to entering the place here before death. We shall be able to defend ourselves, and perhaps get away."

"Jess as ye say, Chaunce; but it am orful to go in thar. Howsumdever, ef ye say the word, Rock Randel ain't goin' to squanuk."

"Is Silver Ray dead?"

"Sart'in."

"But didn't he come into the cave at the entrance you spoke of?"

"Bless, ye, Chaunce Clifford, I tell ye he am a smoked 'coon—gone under, sure! Hyar they kem, the pesky varmints! How a dozen Texas boyees would walk through 'em! But ef we ar' goin' to give our skulps to 'em pesky spooks, let's do it afore 'em yelling coyotes git 'em, hang their picters! I'm half-froze fer h'ar!"

Shrieking still like incarnate demons, the maddened Indians, led by one no less fiendish than themselves, Buck Warner, fiercely swept toward the whites.

"Back into the cave!" cried Chaunce, and he immediately retreated.

Dandy Rock, with a whoop of defiance, brandished his rifle above his head and followed his companion.

The savages bounded *en masse* into the gorge.

Buck Warner howled for them to charge.

Amid the deafening report of firearms, they obeyed desperately.

War-whoop, rifle-shot, and death-shriek mingling together in mad confusion, the wild besiegers, hoping to gain the entrance before the miners could make a stand, recklessly hazarded the grapple for life or death.

"Load ag'in, fer yer life!" cried Rock, as they had gained the shelter of the cave.

Hastily the two commenced, and, just as Chaunce was drawing his ramrod, The-Man-from-Texas was sighting a bead on the foremost foe.

"Take thet, old smoky-skin! Waugh! Whoop!" and again he reloaded.

The cavern at the mouth was not more than four feet in height, and about the same in width; but it opened to larger proportions inwardly, so that the friends could stand nearly erect, and they seemed to be in a room of considerable size. How large it was impossible to tell, for it was pitchy dark beyond them.

Chaunce had loaded soon, and his weapon spoke the doom of another of the red-men.

Randel followed closely with his second shot, and the third savage dropped.

"Kem on!" shouted the Texan; "we'll give ye yer supper and dig yer funeral free."

It took but a moment for Gold-dust Buck to see the folly of the attack, and he quickly withdrew his followers, when, for the time, the miners were allowed to rest.

"Wal, ef thet warn't hot work, ye may call me a coyote!" exclaimed The-Man-from-Texas, as he wiped the perspiration from his brow.

"They are leaving the ravine," said Chaunce.

"Yas, to patch up sum new deviltry. Ha! be keerful how ye show yer top-knot."

This last was caused by the sudden thud of a bullet against the wall, as Chaunce rather incautiously showed his head.

During the moment their attention was held in front, the miners did not notice the abrupt approach of a light from their rear.

A sharp sound, however, quickly caused them to turn, when, to their amazement, they saw a body of men, armed to the teeth, rushing toward them, the foremost bearing a torch.

Seeing they were discovered, the party uttered a hoarse cry of rage, and bounded up on them.

"Good Lord! our funeral's dug!" gasped Rock, in terror, as he dropped his rifle. "Thar kem the spooks like mad buflers, and we ar' a goner. Oh, Lord! I wish Buck Warner's varmints had me."

It was in truth a dark moment. One word expressed it all—

Lost!

CHAPTER XVI.

AT BAY.

DANDY ROCK was too terrified to move, much more raise an arm against the assailants. With chattering teeth, ghostlike face, and shaking limbs, he staggered back against the rock, and closing his eyes, gave himself up to fate, groaning:

"Oh, Mr. Ghostes, leave my skulp, and I'll promise never to kem here ag'in, but jess huf it fer old Texas like a streak o' lightning on hot ice."

Chaunce saw the folly of offering resistance, and dropping his rifle-butt to the ground, he calmly awaited the result.

"Hol do you surrender?" cried the one with the torch, in a hoarse voice.

"Yes," replied Chaunce, "upon the condition we are treated properly."

"We are honest men," avowed the leader, bluntly, "and if you can show good reason for being here, perhaps we shall not harm you, providing you leave at once."

"The last we cannot do. We have been driven in here by a horde of savages, and even now they are lying in wait for us."

"So-ho! Then that is the cause of the noise we heard? Well, you look like honorable men, and I hardly think we shall have any trouble."

"Am I a goner?" asked Rock, at this juncture, partially opening his eyes. "I—I thought spooks didn't talk!"

"Hang it, Rock Randel!" said Chaunce, somewhat vexed; "you are a fool!"

"By Randel Rock, ef it warn't fer the name o' it—"

What Rock would have done can only be surmised, for as he finally got his eyes open and saw before him four strong-limbed, heavily-bearded men garbed in true miner style, high-topped boots and all, without the least resemblance to spiritual apparitions, he lost speech,

and it took him a full minute before he could comprehend the ridiculous part he had played.

"Gosh! I thought I was a goner ennyway!" and he drew a breath of relief.

Chauncy could hardly suppress a laugh, even in the midst of his danger, while the others burst into a loud guffaw, which made The-Man-from-Texas feel extremely uncomfortable, and had his rifle been loaded, we fear there would have been a different ending to the affair.

"Come," exclaimed the chief, "are you going to submit to being bound, or shall we be obliged to resort to force?"

"Can we not be friends?" asked the young man, almost involuntarily. "We came here with no intentions of molesting you. There are only two of us, and we are, as you said, honest men."

The stranger hesitated.

"I don't know," admitted the man, after a pause. "You say you were followed by Indians. How many, may I ask?"

"At least twenty-five, and they are led by the most cold-blooded desperado this side of Frisco—Buck Warner."

"Buck Warner in the Hollow and around this place!" cried the other, greatly moved.

"Yes; and unless there is some other way of exit, we shall not be able to get away."

"There is not. Then you are at enmity with Buck Warner?"

"Yes; he has hunted us ever since we came into the valley."

"And you will fight him to the bitter end?"

"We will."

"Then our common interests demand that we become friends," and the speaker extended his hand, which Chauncy grasped with a hearty will.

"Hookey!" exclaimed Rock, as he held the palm of the other. "May I freeze to death in hot water ef I didn't think ye war a spook! Blow my nose ef I didn't! But hain't the speerits 'bout hyar now?"

"We four men and our poor blind father just back here are all the spirits there are in Golden Cave, unless we count you."

"Shoo-o!" was all The-Man-from-Texas could utter, though it may be unnecessary to say that he felt better.

"Pardon me," said Chauncy, "but the strange stories I have heard of this place I will confess have made me a little curious."

"I understand," nodded the other. "It can be explained in a few words. Our names are Calvo. Two of us are sons of Castello Calvo, and the others of his brother, Sierra. We four, with our father, are the survivors of the fearful fight when Buck Warner and his Frisco desperadoes tried to drive us from our claim. We succeeded in secreting ourselves in this cave, and thus saved our lives. Finding gold, we commenced digging the ore, doing most of our work in the night time and resting days. Father and sister have labored at the entrance most of the days, that they might see that no one entered the place. They, too, have kept us supplied with provision. Thus, as the cavern has had the name of being haunted, which has arisen in part from our night-work, we have been unmo-

lest until now. Next week we had intended to leave the valley forever. There you have in brief the explanation of the little mystery there is of the Golden Cave."

"But, Sierra, brother," one of the others broke in at this juncture, "has Estelle come in lately? You know she did not return with Joaquin and me."

"Estelle not come back?" exclaimed the one addressed as Sierra, and who seemed to be the leader of the party. "I thought she was with father. The rest of you remain with the gentlemen to guard the entrance until I see if I can find her."

Sierra Calvo was gone but a few moments when he returned, his hurried impatient step telling before his speech that the worst was realized.

"Merciful Heaven!" he cried, "she has not come in! What her fate will be if she falls into the hands of Buck Warner and his savages is too horrible to contemplate!"

The spirits of the others fell as they realized the startling truthfulness of the words.

"Some one must go to her assistance," said Joaquin Calvo.

"How?"

A proper question, but unanswerable.

Sierra Calvo and his brother fairly groaned in their anguish.

"We can only hope for the best," said Chauncy, in a far lighter tone than he felt, for he could not deny to himself that he experienced a deep interest in the welfare of the beautiful mute.

Slowly the time wore on, and all remained quiet outside.

"Perhaps the savages have withdrawn," some one ventured to say.

Rock Randel shook his head.

"Nary a one't," he said. "I know the pesky varmints too well for thet. This quiet ain't fer nothin', I tell ye. They ar' hatchin' up sum new cussedness, I'll bet my top-knot ag'in' yer eye-winkers. So we'd better git ready, fer I tell ye, thar am fun ahead."

"Right!" averred Sierra Calvo. "How a e we off for powder, boys?" he asked, turning to his relatives. "To speak the truth, I dare not look, for I know we are low."

"It is best we should know the worst," said Joaquin; but when he had learned the truth, his answer was given in a husky voice.

There was scarcely a single round of powder in all their store!

"How much have you?" queried Sierra of Rock and Chauncy, in a trembling tone.

"I am good fer a dozen o' the coyotes," said The-Man-from-Texas, as he examined his horn.

"And I have as many charges," supplemented the young Easterner.

"Then we might be worse off," the elder Calvo replied, in a more hopeful tone; "but we must not waste a single grain."

"Wal, I reckon—but say, Cap, ain't there sum loose stuns back hyar, thet we can git to build up a sort o' a breastwork in front?"

"Oh, yes! and I think it would be a capital idea."

The others assented, and while the Texan

held watch at the place, the rest commenced work.

Soon quite a barrier was raised, and resting behind the protection, the besieged miners watched and waited.

The Calvoes had a little provision in the cave, and this was sparingly partaken of, for none had tasted food since noon.

Hour after hour wore away till midnight had passed, and not a sound had been heard outside.

"They have left," one of the Calvoes said, and, with the exception of Rock, the others joined with him.

"That's 'cause ye ain't up to Injun ways. I smell mischief, and I tell ye ye hed better keep clus, or yer top-knot 'll be a goner! Thar am sum fun not a long way off," and with this, The-Man-from-Texas settled into a more comfortable position, and watched, more intently than ever, the dim, uncertain scene without.

"Where can Silver Ray be all this time? I fear you were right, Rock, and that he is dead."

"D'ye think I'd lie? I tell ye he am! Ask these ar' chaps ef a man ever crossed the Line o' Death and lived."

Sierra Calvo shook his head; but his mind was so deeply engrossed with his own sorrow, that he hardly noticed the words.

A moment later, he said:

"Friends, it may be madness, but I am going to try and get out of this place. I must know something of Estelle."

"Ye won't do her enny good, fer yer skulp 'll be a goner afore ye— Look thar!"

The sudden exclamation caused the others to gaze more earnestly outward, when they saw a dark body moving slowly up the gorge, coming toward the mouth of the cave.

"What did I tell ye, boyees? They mean business, and we hev got to keep our peepers open or it will be all up with us. Stand firm, old 'coons, and 'bove all, don't waste enny powder. Jeems Washington! I'm half froze for ther fun!"

CHAPTER XVII.

CHOOSE AND DIE.

"WHAT are they doing?" asked Chauncy Clifford, as the dark form slowly advanced.

"Wal, I reckon they hev fixed a sort o' breast-work o' poles, and ar' holdin' it front o' 'em, and thus expect to 'scape our bullets when they charge on us. Wal, let 'em kem. I reckon sum 'll wish they'd staid with their marm!"

Slowly the savages pressed nearer; how many it was impossible to tell, for they were careful to keep their bodies behind the protection, which proved, as Rock had said, a sort of defense, by fastening a lot of small-sized saplings together.

Nearer and nearer the besiegers came, while the miners behind their brrriers watched them in breathless silence.

"Don't fire till I say the word, and then be sure o' yer red," hissed the Texan.

When within a couple of rods the horde paused, and for an instant a plumed crown appeared around one end, as if to reconnoiter their situation. Rock handled his rifle nervously, but whispered:

"Not yet."

Again the Indians moved a little nearer and then paused:

"Kem along, ye smoky-skins; I reckon we hev got sum supper fer ye," chuckled The-Man-from-Texas, who seemed to be actually enjoying himself.

Still once more the rude wood-work was brought a little forward, when again it became stationary.

All this upon the part of the savages had been done without noise, and now as they paused not a sound broke the stillness of the night.

In the midst of the silence the quick whirr of an arrow cleft the air and the barbed weapon passed just above Dandy Rock's head.

As this seemed to have no effect others followed in moderate succession, until a dozen had been fired.

"Let 'em work," Rock had whispered. "They 'll git bolder when they find they don't 'rouse us and begin to show their greasy carcasses, when we kin spot 'em slick!"

As yet none of the red-skins had exposed themselves, their firing having been done through crevices between the poles evidently prepared for the purpose.

But with patience The-Man-from-Texas was biding his time, and in a moment it came.

One of the savages getting uneasy and anxious began to peer cautiously around the end of their obstruction as before. No harm seeming to come, another followed his example, though they were seen only for a moment.

"Ready, boyees!" said Rock. "D'ye see 'em bright spots a-through the chinks thar? Wal, ye take the left one, Chaunce, and I'll take the other; and when enny more heads poke out the rest o' ye sight 'em, and we'll all fire ker-slap."

In a minute the heads again appeared, with an addition of one at the other end.

"Now!"

In an instant the report of five rifles rung as one, and the air was filled with wild yells of pain and terror from the surprised red-skins. Then, with a crash, their carefully improvised defense fell forward, when the whole party were exposed to the whites.

Wilder yells than ever succeeded as the terrified besiegers turned to flee.

"Whoop!" yelled Rock, excitedly, "g'in it to 'em!" and he rammed a charge into his rifle like mad.

The Calvoes had double-barreled weapons, and with fatal effect another volley was sent after the savage horde, every shot bringing down its victim.

"Thar!" snorted The-Man-from-Texas, as he sighted his rifle for the second time, "thar's another funeral dug, and by the pipe o' glory! only two o' the pesky covotes hev saved their carcasses. I reckon *they* won't keer about tryin' thet game ag'in."

Evidently the Texan was right. At least half a score lay dead, slain almost in a breath, through the failure of their scheme.

The miners had scored the first victory, but they could not repeat it many times, as when they reloaded their weapons only one round of ammunition was left!

"We are fairly entrapped," said Sierra Calvo, "and unless we can manage to get out of this before our ammunition is gone we are lost."

Rock shook his head.

Truly their hope hung on a slender thread.

Half an hour passed, and the suspense was unbroken.

"If it was not for Estelle, I would patiently await the issue," continued Sierra; "but, oh God! I shudder as I think what her fate would be if she should be captured by these fiends, and she cannot escape them! Let the result be what it will, I am going to try and get out of this. I may be able to run the gantlet. It can't be much worse."

Desperate in his despair, the man seemed determined to carry out his rash purpose. But Rock said:

"Jess wait a minnit. S'pose we rig up somethin' to look like me and poke it out. If the varmints are round they may fire at it, and we can get an idee of their location, ef no more."

It was a capital suggestion, and they set about the task at once.

Finding some pieces of wood which would answer to make the form of the body, they soon dressed it up, and, surmounted with Rock's sombrero, it seemed suitable for their object.

The-Man-from-Texas, taking the dummy, slowly raised the head above the pile of stones in front. Allowing it to remain there a moment, he quickly withdrew it. This was repeated several times without any effect.

"Plague take their ugly picters, I'll fix 'em!" gritted the Texan.

Then silently removing a portion of the barrier, he cautiously pushed the form over the rocks its full length.

Still all was quiet without.

"Way don't the pesky fools wake?" ejaculated Randel. "But, mebbe, they can't discern him so fer in hyar, fur it am quite dark. Gimme a stick."

A pole being quickly procured, he crowded the figure along the stony bottom perhaps ten feet when, like a flash, a dozen bullets were sent plump into it.

"Blaze away, ye smoky varmints! ye jess make fun lively!" and if The-Man-from-Texas didn't laugh, it was not because he didn't want to.

"Don't thet show what ye would kem to the minnit ye show yer carcass? I tell ye we are hyar, and hyar we hev got to stay. 'Em coyotes wouldn't leave till they git our top-knots, ef they hev to wait until we hev passed in our checks and left 'em dry."

After a while the dummy was drawn back, and Sierra Calvo was fain to acknowledge the folly of trying to leave the cave. Thus slowly the remainder of the day and night wore away, until the gray light of morning began to appear.

Just as it was getting light enough to see plainly, the form of a man was seen in the distance approaching them.

Rock fingered his rifle nervously, and seemed on the point of firing, but noticing that the person was apparently unarmed and carried a sort of impromptu flag in his hands he refrained.

"Wants to talk, mebbe," muttered the Texan.

"Yes, and 'tis Buck Warner!" said Sierra Calvo, fiercely. "But perhaps he wishes to make terms of peace with us. I hope we can learn something of Estelle."

"Ho, there!" cried Gold-dust Buck, pausing at a respectful distance.

"Whoa 'tis, and whoa it'll be to ye, ef ye don't tell us what ye want!" retorted The-Man-from-Texas, coolly.

"I have come with offerings of peace for your good. See, I am without any weapons. I trust I shall have nothing to fear from you during a short consultation."

"Ef ye hev got ennythin' to say, spit it out, fer I'm in a 'tarnal hurry."

"Will you surrender without further resistance?"

"Nary a chip, uncle."

"Not when it's for your own good to do so?"

"Don't know him, uncle."

"Bah! you're a fool!"

"Sho! you are sum chip on a stick, I s'pose!"

"Look here! I have no time to bandy words. Will you surrender, or shall we have to starve you out? I will give you one minute to decide."

"We'll starve or go under!" was the terse reply.

"Then die, if you wish! But wait; I have another proposition. The mute girl is in my power, and upon your decision shall hang her life. Refuse to accept my terms, and she shall die before your own eyes from the greatest tortures which the minds of savages can invent! What say you now? Will you surrender to save her life, when you know it is death to yourself to refuse?"

"My God!" groaned Sierra Calvo; "'tis as I feared. Can't some terms be arranged to save her?"

"Mebbe; but he may be foolin' 'bout hev'in' her," answered Rock. Then to Warner he said:

"Ye say ye hev got the gal. Where am she?"

Gold-dust Buck waved his hand, and, in a moment, a couple of savages appeared in the background; and, sure enough, they had the beautiful girl—a captive.

"Merciful Heaven! let me go if it will save her!" exclaimed the wretched brother.

"Thet would be wuss nor nothin', fer I don't believe the coyotes think thar are enny hyar but me and Chaunce. Ye jess keep still a minnit. I reckon ef it'll do the gal enny good, Rock Randel will be the first one to give up his life."

"Yes," chimed in Chauncey Clifford; "if it will save her, I, too, am ready to surrender."

Noble words, bravely spoken.

"Come," cried Warner, impatiently, "what have you decided to do? If you throw down your arms and give up quietly, I promise the girl shall be set at liberty. Refuse, and I shall allow the red-skins to do with her as they choose! Decide quick!"

"What are we to expect ef we gi'n up?"

"No worse fate than you will get if you are fools enough to decline; and you will save the mute fearful suffering."

"Gi'n us five minutes to decide in."

"Very well; but, mark me, let there be no treachery. I see only one chance for you, but,

of course, it does not matter to me, so suit yourself; yet if you have one spark of humanity, think of the girl."

"Humanity! What mockery for *you* to speak of it, you monster!" hissed young Clifford.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN INDIAN'S PERFDY.

"WAL, boyees, what am the word?" asked Rock, as he turned to his companions.

"Let me go and save my sister," cried Sierra Calvo.

"And me, too," broke in the brother.

"Twon't do," avowed The-Man-from-Texas.

"Ef the coyote don't know ye ar' hyar ye hed better keep shady; and if Chance and I pony over ye may be able to help us."

"You are right, Rock," said Clifford. "We can't hope to escape by staying here, and really we are no better than captives now. No ammunition, and but a morsel of food. If the villains can be depended upon to spare Miss Calvo, I, for one, am willing to exchange the uncertainty of this situation for that of captivity."

"And hyar am the 'coon as is with ye, every time."

"All right then. Tell Buck Warner we surrender upon the condition of safety to Miss Calvo."

"God bless you both!" cried the Calvo brothers, as they grasped the gallant miner's hands. "We would it were we who were to make the sacrifice; but don't you do it on our account."

"It will be best for all concerned," answered Chauncy.

"I reckon so, if the sneakin' varmints don't go back on us. Ar' ye ready to 'liver the verdict?"

"Ready."

"Hyar, Buck Warner," called Rock, "s'pose we chip in, how are we to know ye'll let the gal go and not hurt her?"

"I swear it, before God and man, she shall not be harmed! I have nothing against her, but you have so roused the savages that they are bloodthirsty; and, unless you save her now, she will have to die, and then you will have to follow."

"Wagh! I don't s'pose our top-knots will be worth the hide they ar' kivered with."

"You must take the fortunes of war."

"I don't keer what I take, ef I only save my skulp. So scat, fer my pard and I hev decided to jine ye."

"Then you surrender?" cried Warner, exultantly.

"Ef ye swear the gal sha'n't be touched. 'Member, ef ye go back on yer word, the ghost o' Rock Randel 'l haunt ye till yer dying day!"

"Come out of your den, and let there be no treachery," said Gold-dust Buck, triumphantly.

"Es soon es I find my head-gear," and his person disappeared from the opening.

"Wal, Chaunce, it am ye and I. Here, the rest o' ye, take what powder we hev, and make good use o' it. Ef Rock Randel goes under, tell 'em he died game."

"I pray you will escape," said Sierra Calvo, and the others echoed the words. "Depend upon us to do all in our power to save you. I wish it were we who were to make the sacrifice."

"Don't call it such," replied Chauncy, as he prepared to leave the place.

"Please do not be rash, and needlessly lose your lives to try and help us."

A few moments later the noble twain held for perhaps the last time the hands of their friends.

Tears glistened in the eyes of the brothers, and their emotion would hardly allow them to speak.

Slowly leaving the fearful place, Rock and Chauncy boldly advanced to meet the fate in store for them.

"Good!" cried Warner, as they approached.

The next moment the horde of red-skins dashed forward, and almost before they could realize it the two friends were rudely seized.

"Now, dogs, you shall die, and at last my way will be free to the cave of gold!" exclaimed the exultant Gold-dust Buck.

Like a pack of angry beasts quarreling over prey, the bloodthirsty savages bore Chauncy and Rock swiftly away from the cave.

The hopes of the prisoners began to rise as they thought the Indians would not stop in the vicinity, thus giving their friends a chance to escape; but even in this they were disappointed for just down the ravine, in plain sight of the cavern entrance, the horde paused, and dancing in fiendish glee around the captives threatened to kill them at any instant.

"There, Raging Wind," exclaimed Gold-dust Buck, to the savage leader, "I have kept my promise and now you must set the girl at liberty."

"Gal heap purty; Raging Wind want her for his squaw."

The faces of Chauncy and Rock blanched, as they heard the stolid utterance which boded so greatly of renewed peril to the fair one whom they had expected to save. Even merciless Buck Warner grew pale.

"No! no! not that!" gasped the renegade. "You promised me her freedom when we had secured the men. Raging Wind is not a Digger that he talks with a crooked tongue."

"Raging Wind think a heap of white squaw, and he no give her up."

"But you must! and, by heavens! you shall!" cried the exasperated Warner, who was proving himself more of a man than might have been supposed.

"We see," was the terse reply of the savage.

Buck Warner turned to his followers; but they were a mere handful as compared to the number of his allies, and he saw inevitable disaster to himself should he defy the wily red-skin. After all, he had but few scruples to overcome before he acceded to the decision of the Indian.

"You see that I cannot do more for her. I have kept my word, so that no blame can be attached to me though I am really sorry I could not have saved her as I expected," Gold-dust Buck said, in an indifferent way, to the captive miners, as the horde dragged the beautiful girl forward to the place.

How Chauncy Clifford longed for freedom as he cried:

"Dastard! this is a monstrous outrage! You must save her!"

As well talk to the babbling waters of Silverstone Creek. Alike deaf to their entreaties as to all appeals of humanity, the demoniac horde prepared then and there to put into execution one of the most fiendish deeds the minds of barbarians can devise.

Selecting a sapling of suitable size, the miners were tightly lashed to the body, one on either side. Then, while a part of the throng commenced to inflict a course of torture by brazing the skin with their knives or pointed sticks, others were busy in bringing such brush and dry wood as they could find to feed a mass of fire.

Death at the stake was to be the miners' fate.

In a few moments a pile of brush and combustible matter had been piled breast-high around the doomed men.

Then, joining hands, the excited red-men danced about their victims in maniac glee.

Dandy Rock, better versed in Indian craft, seemed almost indifferent to their cruel torture, and even expressed contempt for their punishment. But Chauncy could not help wincing at their devilish work, and often betrayed signs of agony, which only aroused the savages to inflict still deeper suffering, while their hideous visages fairly gleamed with satisfaction.

Often and often the two turned their gaze toward the cave, but no indications of their friends were to be seen. No, 'twas madness to think of rescue from them.

The beautiful mute had been a silent spectator of the ominous scene but Clifford could see that she was deeply in sorrow, and again and again her lips moved as if she would speak.

Finally, fixing her eyes upon Gold-dust Buck, she beckoned for him to approach her.

In a moment the desperado was by her side, and in answer to the mute appeal of her gaze, he suddenly cried:

"For God's sake, if you have a tongue, speak!"

A wild yell rung on the air. He turned.

The savages had fired the wood. A tiny flame shot up, and, quickly spreading, the blaze darted around the encircling pile. As the stifling smoke was lifted upward, the demons, with renewed cries of triumph, all joined in a wild medley of confusion and horrible scene of torture.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOT WORK.

AROUND and around in mad glee danced the savage horde. Higher and higher leaped the fiery furnace of flame. Hotter and hotter grew the air to the doomed victims at the stake, till it seemed as if they could not breathe, and, in greatest agony, they cried aloud their distress.

Must they die thus?

Still the inhuman devils were almost frantic with exultation. Buck Warner was pale and excited. The girl-miner, her beautiful countenance now deathly pale, was frantically wrestling with the ligatures that bound her.

Suddenly, then, an unlooked-for change instantly transformed the scene into one of even wilder confusion.

Raging Wind, the Indian chief, yelling and dancing at the head of his followers, at this moment, as if stricken down by an unseen power

from above, fell headlong to the earth, without even a death-cry to tell that he had fallen.

In terror, the others paused. A moment they gazed on the face of their chief. A crimson spot on the warrior's temple told of his doom.

Shouts of triumph were ended in shrieks of terror.

Still, crackling, seething, almost roaring, the fire raged on.

Another instant and a second Indian threw up his arms like one death-stricken, and, without warning, staggered forward, to fall as his companion.

The frightened savages now seemed paralyzed.

At this crisis an unearthly cry rung through the valley, and then, with rushing strides, a strange, uncouth being, whose long snow-white hair streamed far out in the breeze, dashed into the ravine.

Chauncy Clifford saw in him the wild man of Death Canyon.

Through the red-skin's very midst, hurling them aside as wind would the forest leaves, he sprung toward the beautiful mute, swinging in his fierce clutch a knife of huge proportions.

He reached her side, and, dashing Gold-dust Buck to the earth, with another cry of fiendish madness he severed, at a single thrust of his knife, the thongs that secured her, and then turned to face the excited savages.

The renegade whites were the first to recover their self-possession, and, as Buck Warner staggered to his feet, bruised and almost senseless, they drew their weapons, and were ready to annihilate the daring intruder.

"Down with him!" roared Gold-dust Buck.

"Hurogh-owgh-gh!" yelled the savages.

The wild-looking rescuer uttered a shriek as terrible as any, and, as if terrified, turned to the right, and without another cry fled down the gorge.

A part of the Indians followed.

The beautiful mute was again at the mercy of the savages.

Warner and his followers attempted to secure her once more.

She saw the knife the old man had dropped. Quickly snatching it from the earth, she bounded forward, not to flee, but to save those at the stake.

Taken unawares, Buck did not realize the daring movement until the brave girl had reached the burning pile.

Then, ere he or his men could overtake her, she had cleared the flames, and with rapid motions, cut the bonds that held them.

"Hurraw fer Texas and the Queen o' Californy!" cried Rock, as he and Chauncy sprung from their perilous position into the pathway of the infuriated Indians, and still more desperate Warner's renegades.

To retreat was impossible. To fight was to die!

No; what was that?

New cries rung on the air. Out from the Golden Cave sprung new characters on the scene.

A rifle volley succeeded.

Gold-dust Buck and the savages turned in amazement.

Four of their number had uttered their death-cries.

As they looked for their new foes, Clifford and the Texan, bounding to the sides of the Indians who had fallen so mysteriously, seized their arms, and met hand-to-hand their fierce assailants.

Sierra Calvo and his companions had dashed into the field at an opportune time.

The renegade whites and their savages allies finding themselves assaulted from either side were still undaunted. In numbers they far outnumbered the half-dozen.

As the fierce red-men attacked the two, Chauncy and his comrade, protecting as best they could the girl-miner, they returned blow for blow with deathly rapidity.

Their foes between them, it was impossible for the two parties of friends to get together. Thus their strength was greatly weakened. In fact, it was only through almost superhuman efforts they kept up the battle.

The Calvoes at the second fire were obliged to cast their rifles aside, as their last grain of powder had been burned. Then, with drawn knives they strove with redoubled efforts to gain the sides of the others.

"Remember Estelle!" cried Sierra, as he sent his third victim to the earth.

A wonder they escaped the fury of the savages and roughs as they did.

In a moment the brave Calvo leader was seen to falter, and even in the act of felling another foe, his arm dropped as if stricken with paralysis.

The blood gushed forth in a torrent from his side and his face suddenly paled; he turned to utter some word of direction, but failing, reeled to the earth, senseless.

The red-skins saw him fall, and with renewed yells sprung for the coveted scalp-lock.

Joaquin Calvo saw his brother fall, and, perfectly wild in his grief, he threw himself in their course.

The other two followed. Over the body of the slain, the strife was continued with increased fury.

The next breath another fell by the side of Sierra Calvo, not dead, but overcome, and so much exhausted that he lay as if lifeless.

Only two left, and they fighting as only men with all at stake can fight.

Joaquin, the fearful strain of his endeavors fast weighing down his almost herculean powers, suddenly found the long knife he had used so effectually torn from his grasp. Unarmed, he wildly tried to beat back the maddened wretches. A long gash upon the arm is his first wound. Then all seemed to grow dark. He feels the horde above his quivering body, and all is lost!

In this brief interval, Chauncy Clifford and Rock Randel were doing noble work.

Side by side they have fought.

Even the beautiful mute was not idle. With the formidable knife she held, she was no foe to be despised.

Randel saw Sierra Calvo fall, and witnessed the rush made for his body.

Perhaps that dash, causing a separation in the mass of the foes, changed for the time the current of the contest.

"Now, Chaunce! jess ring the varmints out!

T'yar!" he yelled the next breath, as a gigantic savage disputed his course.

In spite of his efforts to the contrary, the Indian closed with the Texan, and thus he and Clifford were restrained from reaching their friends, for Chauncy, though less unfortunate, was single-handed in meeting the others.

Rock was not easily thrown off his guard, but he quickly saw that he had got his match. The red-skin far outstripped him in size, and soon proved himself an adept in a close combat.

Yet the sanguine Texan unflinchingly stood his ground till suddenly an advantage came.

It turned in the favor of the Indian.

Rock's knife was broken short off at the handle, and ere the blade had had time to drop to the ground, with a shout of victory the red fiend followed up his good fortune for a final lunge at the white's breast.

Lost and saved!

A light form sprung before the dusky fiend. The swift stroke of an upraised arm, and the mute miner had saved the life of The-Man-from-Texas!

Rock knew it; but shouted:

"This way!"

He had seen an opening in the ranks of the savages.

Chauncy followed with the girl by his side.

Buck Warner tried to intercept them, but they reached the Calvoes just as the third seemed about to fall.

This success was a momentary repulse to the allied bands.

But the advantage to the miners seemed instantly lost.

A piercing scream echoed through the ravine.

In horror the two friends saw the fair mute sway to and fro as if she were falling.

Chauncy sprung forward and caught her in his arms.

For a moment she lay as if senseless. Then she started up like one suddenly awakening from some dream, and said, in a quick, feeling tone:

"Leave me, noble stranger, and flee with your companions. I have received my death-wound!"

The beautiful mute had spoken.

Still no one seemed to realize it. No one heeded her warning. They could not.

The fight was ended. Once more the hardy miners were prisoners.

Chauncy was seized as he held the lovely girl in his trembling arms. She was, happily for her, perhaps, unconscious.

CHAPTER XX.

ALPINE LUKE ON HAND.

His visage gleaming with a look of triumph, Gold-dust Buck commanded his followers to secure the captives.

While a part looked to that, others turned to lend a hand to those who had fallen.

To Warner and his savages it was a victory dearly bought. The earth was nearly covered with the dead and wounded.

"Is the girl dead?" asked the renegade leader, with considerable anxiety.

"Oh, no, Cap," replied Stockton Sharp. "She's good for another trip."

"See that she has the best care we can give her. I don't wish her blood to be upon my hands."

"Hough! Him not heap dead! Me fix him!"

The words were uttered by a swarthy red-man who had been in the act of scalping Sierra Calvo, but, as the steel touched his head, the Californian suddenly started to a sitting posture, causing the Indian to drop his knife in terror, and give vent to the exclamation:

"Ugh! me have him scalp!" and suiting action to the word, the fiend seized a handful of hair on the wounded man's head, and flourished his bloody knife to secure it even while his victim was living!

Some three or four red-skins were at the moment in the act of binding The-Man-from-Texas when that worthy espied the deed. Rock had found himself conquered and was yielding with as good grace as possible; but that sight aroused the hot blood of his nature, and forgetting his situation, he suddenly uttered one of his wild whoops, and dashing his captors aside as quick as a flash, he bounded forward upon the scalp-taker.

"Quit thet, ye infernal cuss!" he roared, and before the other had succeeded in accomplishing his purpose, the Texan seized his person, and lifting him into the air as if he were but a plaything in his giant clutch, he hurled him to the earth with a violence that seemed to have broken every bone in his body.

"Hurraw fer Texas!" shouted the triumphant Randel. "Hyar's a coon as ye don't ketch nappin'!" and with a defiant wave of his hand the lion-hearted plainsman dashed up the gorge.

The savages, though taken by surprise, almost instantly recovered enough to bound into the pathway of the intrepid Texan, and thus cut off his retreat.

Again the ravine was filled with the tumult of battle.

Chauncy, praying for his success, saw Rock recklessly plunge into the midst of his foes, and flinging aside the first, he seized the weapons he had carried, and in his nervous clutch they drank the life-blood of the second.

Buck Warner and all, except the wounded, joined in the fierce *melee* against the lone fugitive.

There seemed no need to stand closely over prisoners securely bound as they were. Again, if there were they were temporarily forgotten in the mad excitement.

Brave Rock Randel knew it was life or death.

Managing to get possession of a second knife, with one then in either hand, he swept his foes down right and left.

"Show him no quarter!" shouted Warner, as he mingled in the fight.

"Whoop, hooray! Look out for mad bufflers!" and with another yell, The-Man-from-Texas, suddenly crouching low and almost seeming to crawl upon the rocks, sprung high into the air, and clearing all before him, he actually broke through the furious horde.

A yell of rage from the savages.

A shout of triumph from the escaping Texan.

Dandy Rock dashed headlong forward.

The others in hot pursuit.

But one course was open to the Texan.

He saw it.

'Twas the Golden Cave!

With no thoughts now of "spooks," he boldly ran for the entrance.

The Indians were too far behind to stop him, and as they reached the gully in front he disappeared into the darkness beyond.

"Whoop! ye hev run the 'coon to his hole; now kem and take him out!" were the words flung from the dark recesses, in a taunting tone.

The enemy, white and red, paused in the gorge, with the yells of baffled men.

In the brief interval of the instant another event had transpired—one of equal interest and greater moment.

Wounded, and, at first, supposed to be dying, the girl miner had not been bound.

Really but slightly hurt, and quickly recovering from her fright, the maiden saw the foe flee to the front.

She saw and knew her duty.

Springing from one to another, it was but the work of a breath for her to free the prisoners.

Once their thongs were cut, and the miners prepared to escape by flight.

In this they would doubtless have succeeded had it not been for the wounded.

Sierra Calvo, though still living, was not able to move. The other who had fallen, Nevada Calvo, could hardly stand alone.

The others, of course, had not the heart to leave them to the vengeance of the fiends incarnate.

Thus the other Californians looked to their brothers, and bearing them up were in the act of retreat, while Chauncy, with the girl by his side, was urging them forward.

Too late to escape.

Buck Warner, back from the cave, discovered the movement, and, with a cry of alarm, he turned his followers to recapture their other troublesome charges; but new actors appeared upon the exciting scene.

A crash in the underbrush awoke friends and foes to the knowledge of a body of horsemen rushing up the ravine.

Then succeeded the sound of human voices.

Hoof-strokes clattered upon the rock-strewn surface of the ravine.

The fugitive miners looked up in joyous anticipation.

Buck Warner's horde started in terror.

Thus both parties for the time were inactive, waiting.

"Now, boys, charge! Spare none!"

A clear voice uttered the command—a tone often heard before.

Alpine Luke, at the head of a dozen armed horsemen, galloped into the gorge.

Gold-dust Buck realized his danger, and sought to flee, but, comprehending his intentions, Shadow spurred his horse more swiftly forward.

"Hold, Buck Warner!" he cried, "or I will shoot you as I would a buzzard."

With an oath of defiance, the renegade still kept on.

Would he escape?

Frantically Luke urged his animal on to intercept the ruffian; and as he rode, he discharged both barrels of his rifle.

The outlaw seemed to bear a charmed existence, for, apparently unhurt, he bounded beyond the Unlucky Miner's fire.

Almost vexed that he should escape, Alpine Luke was about to turn to the fight, for the course taken by the fleeing Warner was too broken to be pursued by a horseman, when he saw Rock Randel leap from the Golden Cave, and springing into the path of Gold-dust Buck, with one of his Texan yells, face the desperate fugitive.

Even then the dare-devil might have escaped, for, producing a revolver, he was in the act of sending its contents into the face of The-Man-from-Texas, when he dropped, without a cry or struggle, to the earth like a dead man!

A victorious shriek from the bluff above, and then Rock saw the old man with snow-white hair, who almost instantly disappeared.

Stockton Sharp, seeing the flight of his chief, tried to imitate his example; but finding it impossible, he rallied the others, when they made a despairing stand.

The tide of battle had turned.

Soon the savages, completely demoralized, broke in wild confusion, and rushing pell-mell for the bottom, those that had succeeded in clearing the line of miners fled in terror.

Many, though, had fallen, and at last the fight for the cave of gold had resulted in favor of its rightful owners.

CHAPTER XXI.

AT LAST.

WHEN their foes had fled the field, and left to them the dearly-earned victory, the friends made a hurried examination of the situation.

Of their number nine were thought to be mortally wounded, though Sierra Calvo was suffering severely from a serious shot.

Others had been hurt, some painfully. The-Man-from-Texas had at least half a dozen cuts and bruises to show; but, in spite of all, he was as lively as ever.

After carefully dressing the wounds of their comrades, attention was paid to their enemies.

Stockton Sharp could not be found, and it was supposed he must have succeeded in escaping.

Sorry at this, the miners were still further disappointed when they discovered that the body of Gold-dust Buck was missing.

Had he escaped death, or had his body been removed?

A little later the party moved down the ravine to an encampment where the men under lead of Alpine Luke had been stopping.

They were a gang of prospectors from Gold-dust.

Here they were obliged to stop, as the wounded ones were not able to be carried further.

Chauncy, guided by the fair girl, had entered the Golden Cave and aided her blind father to join them.

The scene around that camp-fire was one of congratulations and explanations.

"Thank God!" murmured Sierra Calvo, "that you have been spared, dear sister."

"Yes, brother, God has indeed been merciful. But now, you will leave this awful place, won't you, Sierra?"

"Yes, Estelle; as soon as I am smart enough to go, we will get our treasure at the cave and leave Gold-dust Hollow forever.

"I am so glad!" she affirmed joyously.

As nothing more was to be feared from the savages or renegade whites the day was given over to rest and story-telling and jest.

From what was told we glean the following:

In the first place our heroine was far from being deaf and dumb. The deception had been practiced at the request of her father, Castello Calvo, for the purpose of making them appear more harmless, and thus be less likely to be disturbed while mining at the mouth of the Golden Cave; their real object in being there, as we already know, was to watch the cavern.

The Silent Rifleman, as shown by the Calvoes, was a brother of the blind Castello, for he was really sightless, from wounds received in their fight for the claim. His brother had become crazy, and the shattered remnant of his mind sought only for the blood of his foes. Thus he urged incessant war against Buck Warner and his followers, for, as we are aware, none but those connected with the renegade suffered at his hands.

He had probably furnished himself with an air rifle, and with the cunning and unweariness which only a maman possesses, he slew one after another of his victims, until it was no wonder he became a dreaded foe.

We have said "probably" in offering this explanation, for it must be borne in mind that he was still at liberty, and our friends were obliged to leave him behind when they left the valley.

In regard to the "blind trail," as Rock styled it, without doubt it was the madman who led their horses away, and upon reaching the table-rock where the hoof-prints so mysteriously ended, he had through some whim of fear of his, tied up their feet with pieces of blankets; thus they left no trace of their course.

The crimson plume, which in the hands of Estelle seemed to have such a magical effect upon the savages, as we remember, had been a gift from the chief to her for a favor she once had done him, and which he had declared should be a token of peace. Unfortunately she lost it that day, though had she not, it is doubtful if it would have availed any good in the last fight, as the chief had been killed at the first of the onset.

A few days later a party of miners, led by Nevada Calvo, returned to the Golden Cave and secured the precious treasure they had secreted.

Within the week, the Calvoes left the valley to the possession of Rock Randel and the others; thus The-Man-from-Texas became one of the richest landholders in Calaveras county.

Chauncy accompanied the Californians to their new home, for in the beautiful Estelle he had found his heart's idol, and his greatest happiness was when in her blessed presence.

To make a long story short, he never returned to the East to stay for any length of time.

He and the fair girl of the mines were soon after wedded, and together they finished the journey of life; and happy and contented in each other's love, they strewed their way with garlands of flowers.

THE END.

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